

“You who read me- are you certain you understand my language?”

J. L. Borges, The Library of Babel

**To One
Who Dreams
Of The
Abyss**

Irren Echo

Of Freaks...

It had been a hard few weeks. A horrible few weeks, truth be told, but then times were hard all over and there was no one to blame. *Might be easier if there was*, he thought to himself, draping his dusty coat over the back of the kitchen chair and sitting down to a drink. He left his scally cap on, couldn't say quite why, perhaps he'd just forgotten to take it off. Mulling over his drink, a cheap, rot-gut whiskey, he tried to ignore the noises coming from the next room, tried to forget about the patients he'd treated as he made his rounds through the neighboring towns. A stillborn infant, blue and angry as hell for being denied his turn; an old man, in the tight grip of the clanks; a boy, twelve years if he was a day, coughing up blood and bile and the soot that caked his lungs. "Ah gotta do right by them," he had told the doctor, wheezing, gesturing to his three younger sisters huddled by the doorway watching. "Ah'm tha man'a tha house, yeh know."

I done what I could, he thought sadly, helping himself to more whiskey. The noises had stopped, and their neighbor from the next farm down nodded an awkward greeting as he gathered his coat and hat and left. The doctor heaved a sigh. "Ah done what Ah could," he breathed, and drained his glass again.

He was halfway through his third when she came out, fully dressed but still slightly disheveled. "Oh," she gasped when she saw him, "hello deah." She leaned in to kiss his cheek, but he stood, pretending not to have noticed, and topped off his drink.

"Yeh' promised," he said to the wall behind the counter, "yeh' said they'd be out 'fore Ah got home."

She sighed and sat, chin in her hands. "Ah'm sorry, hon. Yeh' was late comin' home, two days late, an' Ah fig'ured Ah'd have time ta get one more in b'fore.... Yeh' know we need tha money."

The doctor sat heavily ad stared at his drink. "Ah know."

"Ah'm sorry."

"Ah know."

She put her hand on his arm. "Yeh've had a rough time of it, haven't yeh? Ah got some fresh eggs last time Ah was in town, an' some scraps'a bacon ev'n. Ah'll make yeh' an omelet." It was almost a question. He shook his head.

“Not hungry.” He turned to her and started to speak, intended to ask how much she’d made while he was gone, hoped it would help him justify their recent reputation in the town, but stopped short when he got a good look at her. To his credit, he did an admirable job keeping the anger from his voice, but a hint of it lingered and she caught it and bit her lip. “When were yeh’ gonna tell me?”

“When yeh’ got home,” she whispered, “Ah only just realized myself.” She put a hand to her stomach and gazed at it absently, trying not to cry. “It’s yers, Ah think,” she finished.

He regarded her for a moment, needing to laugh, wanting to cry, unable to do either. She did cry, and it surprised him how little it bothered him. “Yeh’ know what we’ve gotta do,” he said at last. She looked horrified. “We can’t afford it. Yeh’ know that. And this ain’t no world ta be raisin’ a child in. Yeh’ know that too, don’tcha?” She nodded. “Well, let’s jus’ see how it goes. Mightn’t ev’n survive ta term, what with yeh’ doin’ whatcha do....” She began to cry harder, and he moved mechanically toward her, put his arms around her. “Ah did pretty good this time round, what say we go an’ get yeh’ a nice new dress ta’morrow? Ah missed yeh’,” he kissed her lips and her tears fell into his beard. “Yeh’ sure it’s mine?”

She dropped her eyes and shook her head. He nodded sadly.

The pregnancy was a difficult one, and his doctor’s intuition told him there were twins. That’s what everyone else said, too, and the way she carried said it was girls. The couple had many a talk on the subject, about how girls could help her tend the garden that was slowly degenerating as the pregnancy dragged on, and boys could study under their father and provide much-needed medical care to the surrounding townships. “It’s girls,” he said again and again, and once, when she was in a mood to agree, she meekly implied that it would only be a handful of years before they could follow in their mother’s line of work and bring in a nice bit of cash for the family. He left in a wordless fury, and spent the night on a barstool.

Many such nights were spent at the bar, but the doctor was never alone. There was always someone else, willing to discuss politics or the fearsome storms that repeatedly swept across the

country demolishing crops and ruining lives. It was worse in the West, they heard tell, but no one really believed it. Folks in the West probably said the same about the East. Things were bad all over, no one could deny that, and though the stories were never new a stranger in the bar always meant something fresh to hear while they drank away their sorrows.

The townspeople were a friendly lot, welcoming and accommodating when the need was there, so the doctor was taken aback when he walked in one night, nodded to familiar faces, and noticed the lone figure at the bar. Everyone had given him a wide berth, warily watching him as he sipped his drink in silence, rapping occasionally on the table to refill the glass. The bartender tried each time not to look at the large, misshapen head, bobbling gently on slumped shoulders. The little stranger's legs dangled well above the floor, and as he slid up to the bar the doctor wondered how the tiny man had managed to mount the stool at all. He inquired after the stranger, and was informed that he was with the carnival that had just come in. "Imagine, a carnival in times like these!" the barkeep muttered and shook his head, quickly remembering other duties as he caught the glare of the odd little man.

"Folks need a way ta blow off steam, take their minds off things," replied the doctor, and ordered the stranger's next drink added to his own tab. Cocking an eyebrow, the barkeep did as he was told and the doctor took the seat next to the shabby suited figure.

"Dr. McKay," he said, extending his hand. "Yer new in town?"

"Yessir," came the reply, slightly bulbous eyes fixed on the glass in front of him. He didn't look up until the fresh drink came into view. "Thank yeh' kindly," he said, before wriggling off the stool and standing, with the help of a delicately carved walking stick, and imposing three feet.

"Off so soon? Stay, friend, an' drink. Haven't seen a new face round here for some time, would be nice ta hear some new tales."

The little man considered it, then reluctantly took up his seat again. McKay had to fight the urge to lift him up by his armpits and help him onto the stool. There were snickers from across the room, but the little man ignored them. "Stories, eh? What sorta stories yeh'

lookin' fer, friend?"

The doctor thought this over. "Well anythin', Ah reckon. Not much change these days, from one story t' th' other, but surly yeh' got somthin' new ta say."

The stranger smiled ruefully. "Stories Ah got, di'nt say otherwise," he shook his head and took a drink.

Mckay tried again. "Ah heard tell yeh're with tha carnival just rolled in."

"Yessir, that Ah am. Yeh' and tha missus should come by, there's somethin' fer tha whole fam'ly."

They sat in silence a while, nursing their drinks. The dwarf stood up to go. "Thank yeh' kindly fer tha drink. Sorry Ah wasn't better comp'ny, havin' a rough time of it of late."

"Ain't we all?" mused the doctor. "How long yeh' in town fer?"

"Bout a week, Ah reckon, if business is good." He slid a flyer from his pocket, wrinkled and stained, an ad for the show. "Bring tha kids," he said again, "fun fer tha whole fam'ly." The bar silently watched him hobble out into the night.

Mckay returned home that night to screaming and blood the likes of which he'd never seen in all his years of medicine. His wife had gone into labor early, and something was wrong. Several women were offering what little assistance they could while the midwife bustled around, desperately trying to remain calm. She pulled him aside when he entered, already rolling up his sleeves. "I hate ta be tha one ta tell yeh' this, doctor, but I don't reckon she'll last tha night." He shook his head and set to work.

As the second head crowned, Mrs. Mckay lost consciousness. It was a fight to finish the job without her, but they managed and cleared out the assistants as the midwife cleaned up the screaming infants. An idea had occurred to the good doctor while they worked, an unbidden image that refused to dissipate, and he sat dwelling on it while his wife's breathing grew more erratic. The midwife left, begrudgingly, once the girls were wrapped up and sleeping, and Mckay held them in his arms, one at a time, wrestling with the plan that would come to fruition whether he like it or not.

Taking out his medical bag, he removed his set of scalpels.

We can't afford two more mouths, he told them silently, *it's better this way*. As an afterthought he dabbed some of the rotgut onto each set of lips and waited for their breathing to deepen, occasionally glancing over at his wife.

The girls stopped wriggling and lay quietly, and he set to work as tears threatened to obscure his vision. With the first incision the fog cleared and the plan became reality. There was very little blood, his movements were precise and when all was said and done he stood for a moment, admiring his work in spite of himself. With a last look at his wife, who seemed to have stabilized into a normal sleep, he gathered the children into a blanket and headed out into the night.

It was difficult to carry them both that way, but he found his destination with little difficulty and was left waiting only a moment after the echo of his knock faded away. The tiny man from the bar appeared at the door, still clad in his shabby overcoat and fedora, this time sans walking stick. He gestured the doctor inside and shut the door behind them.

The wagon was cramped and small, the furniture oddly sized to fit its owner's stature. McKay sat down awkwardly on a stool and waited for his host to speak. He didn't. Instead, he gestured to the bundle in McKay's arms which was then held out to him, the blanket peeled away enough for its contents to be seen. Bulging eyes grew larger, and a smile pricked at misshapen lips. "Yers?" he asked. The doctor nodded. The dwarf took them into his lap and unfolded the blanket fully. His eyes snapped up, a mixture of anger and confusion. "What's this?" he asked, pointing at the stitches.

McKay sighed. "We can't afford it," he explained, "we can't feed one child, let alone two. Ah thought- well, this's *that* kinda carnival, isn't it?" The dwarf nodded, still unsure. He admired the doctor's work, carefully turning the twins around to see their backs.

"An interestin' idea," he murmured. "Ah'd've never thought of it, myself. Never thought i' twas possible. They're healthy?" McKay nodded. A moment more and he rewrapped the girls. "Ah can't pay yeh' for 'em, a'course," he said.

The sink of McKay's heart was nearly audible. "But Ah

thought- Well, Ah thought that's how it worked...."

"It's, when times is good. Yeh' think Ah can afford ta feed two more mouths right now? Pfft.... No one can. But we can make due, an' we've a mother who's still with child, due any day now, should be enough milk ta go 'round. Ah can take 'em off yer hands, but Ah can' pay yeh' fer 'em."

The doctor nodded. "Ah guess it'll have ta do." He stood to go. "Thank yeh'," he said.

"Wait a minnit," the little man said. He placed the twins on the bed beside him and hobbled toward a steamer trunk, tucked in a corner and covered with a dusty blanket. Removing this, he struggled with the lid and pulled out a small book, leather bound and ancient. With this in hand he trudged back to McKay and handed it to him. "Take this. Ah can' in good conscience take yer little girls from yeh' fer nothin', so here. Been lookin' ta get rid of it fer a dog's age, jus' ne'er found tha right person. Yeh' may not be him, but at least it's somethin'."

"What is it?" He flipped through it, glancing at the pages filled with crawling script. "Taint ev'n English," he said, "though Ah s'pose Ah could sell it fer a pretty penny." He gave a small yelp as the dwarf snatched it away from him.

"Yeh'll do no such thing!" he bellowed, "Yeh've no idea tha gift Ah've given yeh', boy, no idea a'tall!"

"So explain it ta me."

His host sighed and sat on the stool. "May as well hold yer little girls. 'Twill be the last time, Ah reckon." McKay did as instructed, and the dwarf began to speak.

"This here's tha end'a tha world," he said, caressing the worn cover. McKay scoffed, and the dwarf glared at him. "What d' yeh' know, then? Yeh' don' know. Ah got this book offa Mick in London, jus' b'fore the drought. Sold it ta me fer next ta nothin', tol' me it was cursed, said it haunted his dreams and made his days a livin' hell. Reckon he migh' know a thing er two about hell, what with Ireland havin' tha same problems we got now. 'T might be this here book what done it, too, though Ah don' much want ta find out, truth be told." He took a deep breath, then stood to fix a small glass of absinthe and

offered one to McKay, who gratefully accepted. They sipped their drinks as the dwarf continued.

“Ah been all over this great land, been with carnivals my whole life. Not much else a body can do, lookin’ like this, but it’s a livin’ an’ Ah can’t complain. Pretty decent work, truth be told. Don’t mind it much, myself. Anyway, Ah got this book from a Mick who got it from a Jew who got it from someone else.... Jus’ gets handed round like that, no one likes to keep it long. Ah laughed when he said it were cursed- yeh’ know Micks, superstitious as they come an’ like the drink b’sides- so Ah didn’ buy a word’ve it. But yeh’ know somethin’, ‘twasn’t half a year after it come to me that this awful drought took hold an’ tha work disappeared. Sure, people still wanna be entertained, take their minds offa their problems fer a spell, but ‘tain’t nothin’ like it used ta be. Hand ta mouth it is now, never knowin’ where tha next meal’ll come from. Some of my men caught wind of tha book, an’ got it in their heads that that’s what brought all these problems. Like Ah said, at first Ah didn’ believe a word’ve it, but now.... Well, can’ say Ah’m quite so sure. This thing gets into yer dreams, jus’ like tha Mick said. Haven’ slept a full night in Ah-dunno-how-long, without a bitta help.” He gestured to the absinthe. “Ah’m ramblin’ now, ain’t Ah? Lemme get ta tha point. When tha Mick give me this book, he tol’ me a story along with it, an’ since yeh’ wanted stories Ah’ll give yeh’ this’n. Yeh’ can believe it or not, don’ make no never mind ta me. Jus’ hear me out, take this damn thing away from me, and Ah’ll take good care of yer girls, Ah give yeh’ my word. Deal?”

McKay nodded, stroking one tiny head with a finger. “Le’s hear it.”

“Jus’ one more question first,” he said, “have yeh’ named ‘em?”

McKay thought about it. “Sophia,” he pointed to the girl on the right, “an’ Rose.”

The dwarf looked taken aback. “Why those name, i’particular?” he asked suspiciously.

McKay shrugged. “We hadn’ really thought of names, truth be told, they jus’ kinda came ta me.”

“Ah reckon they deserve their own bodies fer a change, those

girls. So to speak,” he chuckled. “Alrigh’ then, story time. Gather round kiddies an’ gents, an’ Ah’ll spin yeh’ a yarn that’ll set yer teeth on edge.” He laughed again, and it sent a shiver down the doctor’s spine. It was too old, that laugh. Too wise and far too old.

**Beasts & Blood
in
Battleship Grey**

He woke up suddenly, completely, and with a gasp as the horribly vivid dream went racing into the shadowed recesses of his mind, fleeing from the stabbing pain that made even his hair follicles shriek. He curled up on the cold stone floor, trying not to move, not to breathe, not to think. A moment or two of this proved that trying not to do so many things at once only made everything worse, and he allowed a soft groan to escape parched, chapped lips. The noise left him, slow and thick as blood, but once free it bounded out into the corridor with the ferocity of a bellow, echoing and reverberating up and down and around until it met with another, less identifiable sound; a rumble, elongated by its pinball journey, that could have just as easily begun as a primal growl, rolling thunder, or running footsteps. Regardless of origin or specifics, the groan and the grumble greeted each other briefly before continuing on their respective paths. The new sound floated past his ears and on into silence as the crumpled figure became a sitting one, listening now with rapt attention, desperately fighting the constant throb of his head.

His alarm came not from the sound itself, but rather from an unnerving familiarity he could not quite describe.

Two minutes....

Five....

Half an hour....

He sat, body gradually slackening, attention wandering as the sound refused an encore. The pain, as well, was subsiding; had done so enough to admit that its source lay behind and slightly below his left ear.

Why can't I remember falling?

Perhaps the sound he'd heard was a result of the injury, the thick blood pounding its way to the spot. He fingered it gently, wincing as a ragged nail scraped across it. It wasn't as deep as he'd assumed, but it oozed thickly, the goo closer to purple-black than red in the half light.

Gradually the pain resigned itself to an irritating tingle, so he considered trying to stand. Cautiously, carefully, he placed both hands beneath him and pushed up. This instantly proved a mistake and his swimming head forced him back onto the chilly floor.

As he sat against the wall fighting the urge to vomit, he examined his surroundings. The room was small, a closet really, composed of matte grey stone. The

floor, walls, and ceiling were each of single slabs, and seemed indeed to have been carved into their respective roles rather than placed there after the fact. The only break in monotony was the opening, doorless, and exposing a space constructed in precisely the same fashion. The chill of the stone told him he was underground, but *why in blue perfect hell would I be underground?*

He deliberately set a large and rather imposing cow on the tracks of this particular train of thought, which promptly succeeded in derailing it- for the most part, anyway. A few cars remained stubbornly upright, calling out to him, "Why not?"

"Impossible," he retorted, nearly aloud but his voice was stifled from disuse. This brought up the question of time, specifically how long he'd been unconscious but that, he decided, was a job for another cow.

The cows, however, had moved on to greener pastures and he was left with the obvious questions: Where, why, how long and, for that matter, how? How did he get down here? It frightened him to realize that he'd fully admitted to being underground, and he racked his brain for an answer but came up with fog and mist, visible and tangible but liquid.

"Amnesia," muttered the cows, and he spent a moment in sheer, unadulterated panic. To lose his mind would be one thing, but his memory was something else entirely. The rationale behind this conclusion was not immediately apparent, but neither was it terribly important. Do amnesiacs know they have amnesia if no one tells them? Certainly. The knowledge of one's self would leave quite the void; they're aware of what they should know, and of the fact that they've forgotten. He tested himself- name, address, telephone number. Not amnesia then, he concluded, and told the cows to shut up. What do cows know, anyway? He sat back, somewhat calmer. Without thinking he reached for his phone and discovered it missing, along with his wallet, watch, and the assorted bits that made their home in his pockets. *Kidnapping, maybe*, he thought, *I suppose that would make the most sense. Where was I last?*

He recalled his last encounter with his girlfriend. He had wanted to show her something, a book or a page in a book, and for some reason he had been dead set against it though he recalled being unable to give an adequate explanation for his fear. She had laughed with a ferocity he'd never heard from her before, and the traces of her affliction, the blood that oozed from her eyes in times of stress and emotional upset, gave the laugh a monstrous quality. But that had been days ago, hadn't it? He was certain of this

but again could not begin to explain why.

The questions continued to file slowly and unbidden through his brain. He forced his mind to clear and fill again with the fog that hindered memory and allowed it to lull him into a sort of half-sleep, the frenzied dreams of this state washed in the pool of blood near the center of the room where his head must have lain. It was caked and dry, and each time his eyes snapped open from the confused and jumbled visions it seemed a bit smaller. He shook his head, wincing more than a little at the fresh stab he expected but did not come. He waited, eyes to the ceiling and, gently at first, then with vigor, shook it like a wet dog. When nothing happened he smiled and stood. He awaited the head rush, the dizziness, the nausea, and did a cautious little jig to celebrate their absence. A second inspection of the wound revealed it as smaller and cleaner than he recalled. With a deep breath he recovered the dignity he'd lost while lying helpless on the floor, and after a quick pause at the door he headed left, hoping the corridor was not as limitless as it seemed.

It was narrow, too much so to stretch his arms out fully and although he was not an especially tall man the ceiling crowded in around his head. His boots echoed strangely as they slapped against the grey masonry; the sound was strained and light, as though taking longer than it should have to find a wall and get back to him about it. A curious procession of thoughts flitted past, among them ducks and their allegedly echo-less quacks, and he allowed himself to be submerged in the flow. He thought of his girlfriend, of the rent that probably wasn't getting paid and the useless landlord who passive aggressively refused to fix anything. A heavy sense of elapsed time found him and he wondered sincerely if his girlfriend had left him yet. He realized that if she had indeed disappeared he would probably never know precisely why or to where, and likely as not most of her things would still be strewn about as though nothing had changed. She would have packed what she could carry and split. He made a valiant, if futile, effort to care. What did seem important, however, was the fact that the backs of his hands were being scraped raw on the walls, and every once in a while an over-exuberant step would force his head to commune with the stone above. He stopped, and looked around.

"Don't be stupid," the cows told him, and he wondered why they were still around. Obviously someone had gone to the trouble of carving out this little place, so why wouldn't they take the time to make sure it was consistent? He glared at the walls, daring them to get closer. Clearly, these particular walls were not at all intimidated by

him and continued on the way they were; steadily, slowly, drawing together and entirely oblivious to his position in between. But it wasn't just the gradual narrowing that set him on edge; it was the fact that the entire corridor appeared to have shrunk, as if the end had followed him like the shadows walking home from the theater as a kid. He willed himself calm, declaring that there was nothing to see and he needn't turn around because the hallway would stretch just as far behind him as it should. He planted his feet more firmly with each step, throat steadily constricting as the echo that should have come from the slapping of leather on stone became less and less pronounced. The sound had less distance to cover; there was no cause for an echo. The hallway, in defiance of reason and his terrified internal protests, was quite definitely shrinking.

"Where the FUCK AM I?!" His voice cracked shrilly on the word 'fuck,' and by the time he reached the 'I,' 'fuck' bounced off of the nearing wall and back into his throat and he choked on it. He tried to run, caught by a sudden blind panic, but the sloping ceiling made it difficult. His shoulders dragged against the walls now but he continued, resigned to an awkward loping trot, toward the doorway that had just loomed up a few yards away. Just ahead and to the right, it was the only one to find him since the cubicle in which he'd awoken. It had no door to guard it either, and reached lower than the ceiling he now had to duck to avoid. The quicker he moved, the more rapidly the hallway seemed to swallow him. The truth of this analogy weighed him down and a scream rose in his throat. By the time he reached his goal, he had to shuffle sideways, squeezing painfully through the still-narrowing opening. He sucked in a breath, trying to make himself as thin as possible. The ache in his head flared up again, and for a split second that lasted far too long he knew he wouldn't make it.

In he burst to a cavern, a vacant, gaping chasm of a room, the limits of which were only implied. The floor stretched out farther than the dim light was willing to do, soaking the walls that must surround it in inky shadows that threatened to devour what little illumination there was. It was then that he realized the light he had taken for granted came from no readily discernible source. No fixtures, no candles, nothing on which to hang reason, nothing to make this alien place a little less foreign. His mind wriggled in discomfort as he fought to catch his breath. He could feel his nerves unraveling, slowly but surely, and a peculiar sense of vertigo began to creep in. There was nothing but space in every direction but down, and even then the plainness of the floor and its lack of definite pigment sent his equilibrium cowering into the corner. Skin

crawling at the unavoidable prickle of standing at the edge of an unseen abyss, he spun around to find his bearings.

There, facing him resolutely was not a squat little opening in a featureless wall, but rather an immense, unadorned arch. It stretched up to a dizzying height, stopping just short of the creeping shadows. He noticed that from this perspective he could see more of the hallway than he had seen from his room, and it was not slightly dwarfed in comparison. It also seemed to have returned to the size it was when he entered it, and he couldn't help but feel slightly persecuted.

He began his trek across the cavernous space, marveling at its size and the fact that there was nothing at all in the way of support; meaning, of course, that the light he was so determined not to question could have come from above, from a gaping hole where the ceiling should have been... had the impenetrable shadows not already set up shop there. Where were the cows when he needed them?

He envisioned himself physically shoving the glaring problem off to a darker, more easily ignored corner of his mind and then forced his thoughts in another direction, any direction. They fled easily into faint memories of history books and storybook legends, of myths and dream worlds that had no place in reality but, apparently, were not strangers to it, either.

A period of time elapsed that could as easily have been an hour as half a day when finally he reached the opposite side of the room. The time spent concentrating on the few visible yards ahead of him had numbed his mind and calmed his nerves, though the fear had taken up permanent residence and was holding his reasoning for questioning at a later date. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw the arched doorway off in the distance, refusing to succumb to the panicked notion that he might well have come full circle. The only distinguishing feature of this side of the room was a tiny shadowed object off to one side of the archway, toward which he hurried, breathing hard.

A shoe.

Instinctively he looked down, assuring himself that his own boots were tightly fastened. A sudden jolt of *déjà vu* reached out and slapped him before retreating again the way it had come as he bent to pick it up.

It was a size 6, a little boy's sneaker with scuffed plastic cartoon pictures on one side. The canvas was dirty and worn but he cradled it gently in cupped hands, stroking the snapped threads back into place. He didn't care much for children, but this

little shoe was the most important thing in the world.

He pocketed the shoe, enjoying its weight, and stepped through the doorway into a hall much darker than the previous one. It was constructed of the same material, but the ethereal light was gone now, save that which eased hesitantly out behind him. He followed this new path, all the while trying not to think about the place and the shoe and the diminishing light, trying to empty his mind and fill it with fog, brushing his fingertips along the wall as a guide. Forgetting all that, or rather ignoring it, was easily achieved, seeing as how *seeing* was beginning to demand a much higher level of concentration. The darkness was closing in, pressing against him on all sides until blackness prevailed and naught but his unwavering faith in gravity could convince him his feet still pointed downwards. His fingers rubbed themselves shiny and smooth as the wall and his ears tuned into the thwap thud-thwap of boot against ground.

Thwap... thu-thwap! Thudthudthud-thwaaapp.... He played with the sound of his steps, much the way he had as a child. It was a nervous habit, like watching for cracks in the sidewalk. He focused, trying to thwap out a tune he couldn't quite place or fully remember....

Something hard and unyielding leaped in front of him suddenly enough to evoke an odd squeaking grunt from deep in his throat. He stepped back and felt around.

A wall, flat and smooth as its neighbors, stood before him. His mind fluttered briefly and he slid his palm along the wall in search of a door. Instinctively his left hand pawed at the air in front of him, unwilling to allow another obstacle to catch him unawares. After fewer than a dozen paces his groping hand hit another wall, perpendicular to the one that had run into him. Frustrated, he spun around and took a step back the way he'd come.

With that step came a moment, a terrifying instant in which any conviction he'd felt about his place in this world or the reality of things he taken for granted was ripped away; like the sky above or, more to the point, the ground below, which was promptly replaced by the upward rush of air that raced itself to get out of his way.

He was falling.

His arms flailed wildly and in vain for something to grab. He fell swiftly, tumbling like Alice and found, to his dismay that salty tears flowed up from his eyes. He sobbed as he plummeted, for himself and his plight and his imminent death, and for the fact that no one would ever know he was there and no one would care if they did. He

inhaled, with difficulty, and tried to calm himself, a deep, shuddering breath that was promptly knocked out of him again as he connected soundly with the ground. Or, rather, with a step that, in its turn, led to the ground.

He lay there, on his back in the darkness, waiting for breath to return and marveling at the fact that waiting for breath was a thing he could still do. He lay still, afraid to move, afraid to discover that he couldn't. An eternity passed and his lungs filled with an explosive rush that made his limbs tingle.

This seemed to be a good sign, and he wiggled one finger experimentally. Following this success he flexed a wrist, twisted a little, bent his knees and the kicked his legs with a gleeful giggle. He touched the wound on the back of his head. *Thought I'd forgotten about you, eh?* He smiled, then wrinkled his face in confusion. The hair around the injury had been sticky with blood, but now the strands of salted black ran silky and straight. The skin beneath felt whole, too. Deciding resolutely not to question it, he got shakily to his knees.

He felt around carefully, swearing the ground to faithfulness before crawling along the wall to his left. The wall that he told himself had been there when he landed. He wasn't convinced, and neither was it.

He knew it didn't matter.

Feeble sense of direction now completely shot, he was somehow even less sure now of where he was or its place in the outside world than before.

That didn't matter either.

Nor did the fact that, in all reality and at this rate, his chances of finding a way out were slim to none.

Labyrinth.

The word popped unbidden into his head. The gravity of its possible relevance caught him around the throat. *Oh, god. I should be searching for food, or something. For all I know I am the food. Or at very least the sport....*

He sat against the wall, so cold he sweated profusely, so frightened and frustrated that he was almost calm. He felt his strength ebb, the will to live and move fading into darkness. He told himself once that it mattered, that he mattered, but his voice lacked conviction. Finally the tears were allowed to flow uninhibited and as he sat there, wallowing in his childlike misery, he heard it.

A tiny sob, heartfelt, echoing his own, exposing the dimensions of the room and

then receding again. A sensation he couldn't be bothered to name gripped him and logic and reason lost out to sheer delight- *I'm not alone!*

The sniffing stopped.

"Hey, kid! Stay there, I'll find you!" At last there was a specific, attainable goal in his mind, and with renewed spirit he scrambled to his knees. At first he didn't hear the thump of tiny retreating footfalls.

"Wait! No, no, where are you going? Stop!" He got to his feet and began to jog awkwardly in what he took to be the direction of the sound. The disproportionate echoing of one shoe and then a bare foot dancing along the sporadic twists and turns of the hallways and rooms played tricks with his ears.

He took a guess and rounded the next corner, only to be thrown back by a crippling light that flowed from somewhere inside the room. He backed out into blackness once more, eyes stinging and tearing and grateful for dark. He examined the threshold, marveling at the distinct but invisible barrier that halted the light abruptly a couple of inches from where he stood. As eyes screamed and protested, he glimpsed a small black figure disappearing around another corner and out of the blinding room.

Frantic now, he called out in desperation. "Come back! I won't hurt you. I have your shoe, you have to come back!"

The chase slowed as it dragged on, around corners and down steps, through rooms and hallways and arches and doors; they were both getting tired.

As he ducked through a doorway, panting and gasping, his jellied legs betrayed him. He crumpled to the floor as the wrong part of his foot caught the edge of a step and he cried out desperately after the tiny retreating feet, "Please, just tell me your name!"

If only he knew. If only he understood that the little boy heard the hoarse cry, but not the words themselves. If only he had known that his grunted howl upon hitting the ground gave the boy an extra burst of energy to out-run the beastie that, in his little boy mind, wanted to devour him. He'd heard the growl too; the one from so long ago. And to him the only difference now was that he knew where it had come from and could therefore escape. Had he known it was a man, he might have stopped... but then again, maybe he would have kept running all the same.

And, once again, they were both alone.

Until the growling started.

The little boy heard the croak, but not the words themselves. More importantly he heard the grunted howl as his pursuer hit the ground and it was this that gave him an extra burst of energy. He'd almost lost it!

'It' being, of course, the thing that had chased him for what felt like hours. Had he known it was a man, he might have stopped. As it was he'd heard the grunting, the panting, the yelling and the thudding steps and his little boy brain conjured up images of minotaurs and monsters and fiends too awful for description. Creatures he'd seen in his grandfather's books, and ones he'd invented all on his own. And each and every one of them was howling for his blood. As he slowed to a staggering walk, the images clarified in his mind. Now that some of the fear had been spent they consisted more of pictures from his own books, rather than the ones he had had to sneak a look at when his grandfather wasn't looking. Books of myth and legend, with carefully inked illustrations, the inside covers of which displayed in fine, jet-black pen below the 'Property of' stamp, the word 'Felix.'

He had almost forgotten it, the little boy and the pursuit occupying his thoughts and his time. It was quickly recalled. The unnatural echoes it created, the horrific images it conjured. For a panicked instant he froze, unsure of where to run. More out of instinct than anything else he chose to follow the boy, reasoning that if the creature came from that direction he could draw its attention away long enough to save the child. As he moved the light intensified. He wondered briefly if they were approaching an exit, a window perhaps, some kind of hope. But the thundering echoes began again and it didn't matter. He had to find the boy.

Why?

Good question.

It's not that I care about being a hero, he told himself. Hell, who would ever know? The kid'll probably die in here, same as me- it's just a matter of when, and how. Kids make a lot of noise, he reasoned, maybe enough noise to distract whatever it is so I can get out.... God, what an awful thought. But who's to say I could save him? For all I know it'll take us both, and no act of heroism would make a bit of difference. And who knows, maybe there is a way out of this hell, and the kid is just smart enough to find it. I'd be doing him a disservice to do anything but throw myself to it, to give him a few extra minutes. He swelled with pride. Anyone else would try to save themselves, he declared, but not me, no way. He smiled, patting himself on the back for his martyr's heart. He continued to run, this time seeking out his pursuer.

It was the same word that was blocked in permanent marker on the inside hem of his underwear, and although he hadn't heard a word of what was yelled after him, let alone that last bit, if he had and if he'd stopped he would have given his middle name instead; Elias. It was so much manlier, he thought, more grown up. Felix was too silly. He'd never much liked the cat.

It had been a few minutes since the pursuing footfalls had ceased altogether, so Felix allowed himself to stop and rest. He closed his eyes and steadied his breathing, reveling in the cool breeze that floated in...

Another corner, another short flight of steps and- *There he is!* The tiny form fled into another room, this one with no second door but enough space to hide the farthest walls from view. A sense of accomplishment filled him while in the same instant he was almost crippled by a sudden noxious odor swirling up and around him. The pungent scent was accompanied by a heavy panting and he stopped cold, unwilling or unable to search the room for its origin, but it made no difference: whatever it was was in the room with him. Instinct and reason and fear fought desperately for dominance. He couldn't turn around and he couldn't move but he had to and he couldn't run and lead it toward the kid and he couldn't stay and fight and he didn't wasn't to die anymore but there was no way to escape it now and way off in the corner of the room he saw the boy disappearing down a spiraling staircase.

His heart leaped irrationally. Escape! He squeezed his eyes tight for a moment, steeling himself for the mad dash that was now inevitable.

Wondering vaguely why adrenaline wasn't dulling the exhaustion that filled him now, he took a breath and started forward, eyes fixed firmly on the railing of the staircase. He felt the thing move behind him.

His eyes snapped open.

Off to the left, just barely peeking around yet another bend, was a short set of stairs. His shoeless foot somewhat hindered his mad dash to the outside world, the horrors of the recent past fading faster as the distance between he and the dollhouse grew. But once he reached the top and the humid air hit him like a bag of marbles, his enthusiasm took a sabbatical.

Where am I?

The space behind the house looked familiar, sort of. The willow tree in the corner, the patchy grass making its sporadic way around the yard, the upturned flower pot all covered with mud and filth.... He knew nothing had changed, not really. Everything was where it should be, and yet....

One step, two.... His right foot connected with the floor and then it was gone and he couldn't determine if he'd found another hole or if the ground had simply decided to amuse itself by opening up and swallowing him. Either way his feet failed him again and he was falling, tumbling, laughing hysterically at his triumph over the monster and over himself and over absolutely nothing at all and as he continued to fall and flail ass-over-tea kettle he waited for the impact; he waited for the breathless moment when he would hit the ground that might be softer than it looked; waited for the pain, or escape, or anything at all.... And the cows giggled softly to themselves.

His memory and the scene before him were like two transparencies, lying one atop the other, each just barely different enough to make the whole thing fuzzy. He stood just outside the basement door from which he'd come, trying to bring it into focus. He began to circle the yard, making his way toward the gate, hoping things would clarify, hoping that a different angle would bring validity to the memory. This was his house. He'd lived there for six years, and that's long enough to know a place.

Unwilling to go back into the basement, Felix wound around to the front. There was no answer to his knock, and it was a full five minutes before he noticed the single piercing green eye staring at him through the pet door. He crouched down and grinned.

He woke up suddenly, completely, and with a gasp as his horribly vivid dream went racing into the shadowed recesses of his mind, fleeing from the stabbing pain that made even his hair follicles shriek. He curled up on the cold stone floor, trying not to move, not to breathe, not to think....

The girl was in his class at school. She sat in the back and drew the grim pictures that had helped give body to the thing in the corridors. She spoke of a book, a book that had been in her family for years, from which the images came. Her name was Rose, and no one ever picked on Rose.

“So, you gonna let me in, or what?” He couldn’t see her frail shoulders, but the movement of her face betrayed a shrug.

“No.”

“Why not?” She seemed serious.

“Don’t wanna.” There was silence for a few seconds and then, “I’m busy. Go away.”

“Why are you always so mean?” Felix asked. Part of him wanted to leave, but an unfounded conviction that he deserved to be admitted kept him there.

Rose’s face disappeared for a moment. The head of a grimy stuffed cat replaced it, and he heard her voice from behind it, “Ask her.”

With the severity and expression reserved for children in the midst of such meaningful interactions, he did. The door clicked open.

“I told her no, but I guess she likes you. For some reason,” Rose smiled, but only barely.

“You’re not very good at joking,” Felix informed her.

“I know.”

He followed her into the kitchen. “That’s a really cool eye patch.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Can I wear it?”

She eyed him, and carefully removed the scrap of cloth, the elastic band snapping loudly as the tension was released.

“Cool. When did you get it?”

She stared at him, then chuckled; a dull, grating sound.

“Now who’s no good at joking?”

He tried to look confused around the eye patch, but then grinned sheepishly. “Oh, yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Are you really?” she asked, holding one slender hand over her eye.

He shook his head. “No, not really.”

Rose pulled her hand away from her face, glanced at it, and quickly replaced it. With her other hand she reached for the patch. “Ok, I need it back now.”

Felix shrugged. “I was bored anyway.”

She snapped the eye patch back into place and adjusted it expertly, but not before Felix noticed the thin red line winding its ways down her cheek.

“It still does that?” he asked, as he ran a finger across the glistening trail.

She nodded. “It always did that, only now one side drips more than the other.” Tilting her head to the side she asked, “Is it really as weird as everyone says?”

“Well it doesn’t happen to anyone else.”

“Yeah, but...” she trailed off with a sigh.

“Why does it happen?” he asked.

“It just always did. I don’t know. I told you that the first time you asked, Felix.”

He started to correct her. It’s Elias, not Felix. But for some reason he didn’t. Instead he said, “Well, I gave it a reason.”

“Yeah, you did. It hurt a lot, though.”

“What did?”

She stared at him. “You know...”

He shrugged. “I gotta go home.”

“You’re not supposed to be here anyway.”

“Yeah. See ya later?” He was out the door and down the street before Rose got a chance to reply. She decided much later that she would have said ‘no’ anyway.

She didn’t like Felix very much anymore.

He said he wanted to know why. Why her eyes cried blood when she wasn’t even sad. Why in the middle of class, when no one was looking, a pool would form in front of her, right on top of her pictures and tests, on her clothes and socks and books. Pools of watery red, slimy and wet and all over everything.

He kept saying it wasn’t on purpose.

He kept telling her that it had just driven him crazy right from the start, the fact that she couldn’t tell him why. He claimed he fell asleep in class and that when he woke up there was red all over them both and he yelled at her from getting it on him and the sharp end of his pencil. She was sobbing and moaning and that made him mad, too. But she just pulled his pencil out of the oozing mess of her face and went back to his picture, until the teacher called the principal who was built like a bouncer and had no qualms with hauling the bloody little boy out by the feet, still clutching the gooey, oversized pencil.

That pencil found its way into the principal’s leg, too, where it remained until the chaos subsided and Felix, eerily calm, was safely wrapped up and taken away. Rose had to be sedated, her brand new eye patch trying desperately to cover an awkward mound of gauze.

She didn’t really remember that day. All she could clearly recall was the drug-induced dream she had had. If it was a dream. Dreams were all she seemed to remember anymore, although there was nothing to prove that they were, in fact, only dreams and not memories trying to free themselves. The days melted together and ran away, fading into the mist and shadow, too irrelevant to be pursued.

Mostly, she dreamt about the basement.

It Always Began With Rose

The basement smelled like an antique bookstore; dusty, old, filled with secrets. Its concrete walls were cracked and crumbling, infant roots and the buds of weeds poking through wherever they could. It stretched as wide in every direction as the house itself, but somehow seemed entirely separate from even the scrap of land in which it nestled. One tiny window provided the only light, the naked bulb that swung strangely from the ceiling just above the staircase had long since burned out and was caked with a thick white dust. That was a large part of why the basement was rarely inhabited; even the window was coated in dust too dense to drag a finger through. At dusk, however, enough light filtered through from the west-facing peephole so that the room was illuminated with a strange dingy glow and one could move among the swirling flecks of dirt and skin without fear of tripping over the only item in the room; a handsome, hand-crafted dollhouse that sat squarely in the center of the floor.

It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship- a perfectly proportioned three-story house with graceful gothic eaves and a pretty shingled roof- a precise replica of the house in which it stood, in which its master craftsman lay dying.

Rose took a deep breath, chest puffed and nostrils flared in that way particular to determined little girls. She stood at the top of the steps, peering down into the waning light, a heavy-duty flashlight in one hand and three little dolls in the other. She hated going down there. It was creepy and cold and it had a curious way of getting dark without warning or excuse. Rose had waited all day for this bit of light to help assuage her fears and she had almost missed it, having been too caught up in the finishing touches Opa had put on the little dolls he'd made for her.

Not that she had much of a choice. Opa was bedridden, and that meant he sent Rose to run all his little errands for him. Sometimes it was as simple as making him a

sandwich, and other times Rose found herself sneaking into her mother's bathroom to pull hair from her brush.

"Details," Opa said, with the wag of an arthritic finger, "art is in the details. Well, that and convincing everyone that those mistakes were intentional." He would chuckle after this declaration as if he'd made a fantastic joke, and Rose always smiled, even if she didn't get it.

She tried to smile now, as she sat atop the first in a long series of steps down into the ever-darkening basement. Her fears had nearly gotten the better of her and she dangled the lit flashlight between two skinny fingers, chin resting in her other hand with the dolls.

Then, without provocation an intense feeling of resolve washed over her. Her bare feet stopped fidgeting, her thin shoulders ceased to tremble and her back straightened. She glared down into the dark, daring it to make the first move. With a deep breath she stood, stumbling a little on legs that had fallen asleep, and took one adrenaline-fueled step down.

"Rose!" her name came on the wings of a shriek, bouncing off walls in its haste, clattering down to the basement. "Rose! In here, *now!*" Her determination shattered, Rose heaved a sigh and headed upstairs.

The summons came again, and a third time before she made her way to her parents' room at the back of the third floor. "Yes, mom?"

"Where the hell were you? I've been calling you for- What are those?"

Rose bit her lip, hand jerking reflexively behind her. Mind racing for explanations, she stared up silently.

"Rose..." it was a warning, "Let me see." Mom reached deftly behind her daughter's back and grabbed her hand, pulling it and its contents out into the light. The fingers uncurled obediently, revealing three perfect little replicas of the family, each with hair and clothing and unique expressions.

They were taken from her open palm and examined carefully, one at a time. If ever there was a time that Rose longed to be in the depths of the basement, it was now.

Her mother glanced from Rose to the dolls and back again, the expression on her face deepening into anger. "Did you make these?" she asked, making a show of trying to remain calm. Rose shook her head, not at all sure if it would be better to rat on Opa or take the blame herself. The indecision continued even after the admission was made. "These are voodoo dolls, aren't they?" she asked, voice hard and sharp. Rose shook her head again. "*Then what are they?!*" she was screaming now, "*and why- Oh my god, this is my red dress! You cut up my dress and used it for this little... Project, and you didn't even ask!*" The words began to trip over themselves and Rose's eyes began to redden. "How many times, Rose, *how many times* are you going to disappoint me like this? You're smarter than this. You're a big girl now, Rose, you should know better than to ruin something that doesn't belong to you!" Her eyes flashed and her arms waved violently as she spoke. There was a beast that lived inside the woman, and it lashed out at Rose with practiced precision.

Great, hot tears welled up in Rose's eyes as the dressing down continued. She looked from her feet, to the window behind her, to the picture of the family and back, always avoiding her mother's face.

"Well?! What do you have to say for yourself?"

The little girl sighed. Her apology was nearly inaudible. Mom gripped her chin in one dry hand and lifted her face to the light. "Rose," there were tears in both their eyes now, "Rose, honey, why do you do these things? I know you know better, and you know I hate to yell at you, but you still do things without thinking. Why?" Small shoulders rose and fell, and she managed to slip from her mother's grasp. "I'm sorry," she muttered again and turned to go.

"Don't walk out when I'm talking to you!" the venom returned, quick and sharp. Mom looked distracted for a moment, searching for something else to say when they both knew she was finished. She repeated the scolding, abridged and somewhat calmer, concluding with a flourish that sent the dolls into the dresser drawer with a thud. Rose was dismissed with the warning that if the dolls went missing *'there would be consequences.'* Rose left the room as quickly as she dared and as slowly as she could, wiping thick red tears from her eyes while saying a silent thank you that her mother had completely forgotten why she had called her in the first place.

"Opa!" she moaned, flying into his room, "Opa, she took them! I couldn't go down and put them away before she took them and won't give them back."

"Ah, Rosebud, why did you give them to her?" he chuckled. His granddaughter's eyes still oozed a little, and he wiped the mess away. "I know how she is. She's scary. I'll get them back, don't you worry. Why did she get so mad?"

Rose shrugged, still sniffing and gulping for air. "She thinks they're voodoo dolls."

He gave her a knowing wink. "It was that horrible dress I used, wasn't it? You told her," Rose gazed sadly at her feet. Opa smiled indulgently and rubbed her back. "You need to learn to stick up for yourself."

"But if I say anything she doesn't believe me and gets even more mad and then she cries until I say sorry even if I didn't do anything and then even when I say sorry she says I'm lying and I—" the crying began again in earnest.

"Don't let her get to you." A beat of silence and then, "Hey, look what I found! Remember this book?" he held out a hard-bound children's book, filled with learning-to-read stories. It had been filched from the local catholic school's library, and the two had read it cover to cover in a single evening, years ago. "It was buried at the bottom of your toy box. *Your mother*

wanted to throw it out but I said, 'no way! Give it here, woman!' Rose giggled. "You want me to read you that story about the little lightening bug?"

The little girl nodded. "And the one about the ghost on the road."

Opa nodded and patted the comforter beside him. "Sit. Now let's see here...." He settled his glasses on his nose and licked his thumb, turning the yellowed pages carefully. Rose snuggled against his arm so she could see the pictures and he began to read.

She remembered neither falling asleep nor being carried to her room, but Mom shook her awake a little after 6 a.m. —interrupting an odd dream that had something to do with a book, and a black cat that died and then was alive again- just to tell Rose that she didn't really care about the dress, and she was sorry for getting so upset. Mom left the dolls on the bedside table while Rose drifted uneasily back to sleep, distrustful of this strange amiability.

She never clearly recalled these early morning conversations, but they happened nearly every day. To her surprise the dolls remained on the table, and Rose scrambled out of bed and down the two flights of stairs to the splintering door of the basement. The usual thoughts and fears welled up as she reached for the knob, but she brushed them aside and the door swung open. With the dolls clutched tightly in one hand she launched herself forward, running and stumbling down the steep steps and into the dust. She threw the dolls into the dollhouse and raced back upstairs, slamming the door behind her and grinning triumphantly. "That wasn't so bad," she whispered to no one in particular. She opened the door again and stuck her tongue out at the blackness.

"Don't slam doors!" Mom hissed from the kitchen, "Your father is sleeping."

"Dad's here?" Rose's voice betrayed some of the excitement she wished she didn't feel.

"He came over last night after you were asleep. But he isn't feeling well, so don't bother him."

"Is-" Rose hesitated, "is he staying this time?"

Her mother hugged her sadly. "I don't know, honey. But you'll see him before he leaves, ok? Now go play. *Quietly.*" Rose nodded and headed upstairs.

"Opa," she sang as she pushed the door ajar. "Opa, can I come in?"

No reply.

"Opa?" she walked in, stood by his bed. "Opa?"

He turned his head with difficulty. "Rosebud."

"Are you ok, Opa? Do you need anything?"

He smiled weakly. "No, Rosebud, I'm just fine. A little creaky this morning, is all. And how are you today?"

"Dad's here." Opa glared toward the doorway. "Oh! And I put the dolls in the dollhouse, just like you asked."

Opa patted her head. "Good girl. Thank you. That house has been empty for, oh, how long has it been... 40 years? Yes, nearly 40 years. It's about time it had someone to live in it." He closed his eyes, massaging one hand with the other.

"Are you sure you don't need anything?" Rose asked again. She leaned in closer, brows furrowed with worry.

"Not now, Rosebud, thank you. I think I will sleep, though, if you don't mind."

Her face scrunched in disapproval. "You've been sleeping all night. It's time to be awake now."

The old man grinned indulgently and opened one eye. "When you're old like me, you can't get too much sleep." He reached out a gnarled finger prodded her shoulder toward the door. "Go play, Rosebud. I'm going to sleep a little. Maybe we can read a little later."

Rose frowned. "But Opa-" she protested, but his eyes had closed and he snored lightly. She sighed and left the room, turning once more just in time to miss his bright blue eyes peeking after her, still pretending to snore. She shut the door as quietly as she could and stood there, unsure of why it was she so desperately wanted him to stay awake. He always took a late morning nap. Why did it matter today?

Mom stood at the kitchen counter, clinking dishes and sloshing liquid. Rose came up behind to watch. Her mother turned around, elbow connecting squarely with Rose's temple.

She gasped and clutched her heart. "Don't *do* that!" she snarled, "you sneak around like a... a..." she shook her head and turned around again. "Are you ok?" she asked absently, "Now, what was I doing?" She stood a moment, thinking, before throwing open the refrigerator and removing a small bottle from the door. A bowl of soup sat cooling on the counter, and into it went several drops from the bottle.

"What's that?" Rose asked. She tried to read the label but the words were long and unwieldy.

"Opa's medicine," Mom explained, squatting down to eye level and adopting an ingratiating tone, "to help him sleep." She caressed Rose's cheek in a way that was meant to be affectionate but only made her squirm.

"He's already asleep. Shouldn't you give him something to help him stay awake?"

Mom stood and patted her daughter's head. "Oh, honey, I know you hate to hear this but you'll understand when you're older." Rose almost rolled her eyes but caught herself in time. "He's sick, sweetheart, you know that. And please leave him alone today, he had a hard night."

Rose sighed and trailed one finger along the dingy white wall. Her nail snagged on a bit of peeling paint and she picked at it, revealing a bright, buttery yellow spotted with little white cats. The house had been full of cats before Omi died.

She collected them; porcelain and glass, needlepoint pictures and old-time prints, not to mention the live ones that had stalked from room to room, darting away when guests came and swatting at ankles and feet whenever their hiding places were compromised. Not a single one had remained more than a week after Omi's passing, because that's how long it took Mom to find the little black kitten Rose had hidden in her closet.

"Mom, why did we get rid of Omi's cats?"

"Because they got underfoot and I said so, that's why."

"But what about the little fake cats, the glass ones and the pictures? *They* don't get underfoot. And the wallpaper, why did we have to paint over that? I like it," Rose continued picking at the paint, revealing a small collection of feline silhouettes.

"Rose! Would you-" Mom swatted her hand away from the wall, "stop picking the paint!" she made a frustrated *tsk*, "now look. That looks awful!" She rubbed at the spot with one thumb as if at a stain. She glared reproachfully at Rose. "We covered it up because it was ugly. It was old and worn and ugly and now we have to stare at this spot until I can get around to painting over it..." the air was sucked up noisily through her nose and then forced out again, just as loudly. She shook her head. "Don't pick at the walls, Rose. Go find something to do."

"I can paint this spot if you want," Rose said carefully.

"No. Just go *do* something. I'll fix it later." The sigh that followed was deep and sorrowful, as if that missing flake of cheap paint was the embodiment of all that was absent from her life and the role of martyr she thrust upon herself each morning like a cloak was just about too much for her to bear sometimes.

She didn't see or hear Rose sneak out of the kitchen, because if she had she probably would have changed her mind about making her paint the wall.

It was a bored little girl who sat on the thick carpet outside the kitchen door with her legs spread out before her, back against the wall. She couldn't go outside, couldn't play with the neighborhood kids without adult supervision. She had asked about it once, when a little boy from down the street saw her drawing with chalk in the driveway.

"Hey! You new here?" he'd asked, slightly out of breath.

Rose had nodded shyly, not really looking up from her picture.

"Wanna come play pirates with us?" the boy asked. He had thick black hair that curled slightly and hung in his face, obstructing his view of the world. He brushed it away impatiently, waiting for a reply.

"I guess. Lemme go ask."

"You have to ask first?" the boy was incredulous.

"Why?"

"I'll get in trouble if I just leave," she said.

"But we're not going anywhere. I'm not allowed to leave the neighborhood, and neither are the other guys. So come on, hurry up!"

Rose smiled. She dropped the chunk of bright pink chalk and ran inside. "Mom! Some of the kids want me to play with them!" her surprise was obvious. "Can I?"

There was a pause, brief and pregnant. And then her mother had laughed. "Uh, no, Rose, you have to stay in the yard." She chuckled again. "I assume there aren't any parents around?"

Rose was silent, weighing her options carefully.

"Uh-huh, that's what I thought. You know better. I mean, if your little friends want to come play in the yard with you, that's fine, but you can't go running off with them." Her head shook of its own accord, amused at the absurdity of the whole idea.

So social interaction was out of the question if school was not in session, and Rose was at a loss. She couldn't even watch TV until the monster on the sofa became a man again. The accordion door to the living room was open a crack, and Rose peered in. The gentle sound of snoring drifted over from the far side of the couch, and the screen flickered meaninglessly from commercial to show and back with no audience or enthusiasm. Rose wondered vaguely why TVs looked blue when seen through closed windows. She crept through the gap in the door and on toward the towering bookshelf, on the way righting a foul smelling, mostly empty bottle and setting it within arm's reach. A peace offering of sorts, in case he did wake up. She scanned the shelves, searching for something that might have some interesting pictures since most of what was there she couldn't read yet.

She'd tried, oh how she had tried one boring, rain-soaked afternoon, but to no avail. Many of the thick, leather-bound volumes came in languages she knew were not English, and even the ones with English titles used words so extravagant and full of frills they may as well have been foreign, too. The pictures, though, were something to behold. She'd learned from listening in on conversations between Omi and Opa that the books were all about the same thing, and it wasn't good. It wasn't something that Omi approved of, at any rate, but Opa loved it- had studied it extensively- and the ancient volumes were his prized possessions. But he wouldn't talk with Rose about them, and he wouldn't answer questions and he wouldn't tell her what certain words were when she tried to read them, but he never said she couldn't look, so look she did even though some of the pictures had given her nightmares.

With a frown she stretched up, trying to find one among the myriad leather spines that was not familiar, that she hadn't at least briefly flipped through. The brute on the couch snored loudly and coughed. She froze, wanting him to wake up as

much as she didn't. It had been so long since he'd been home, and she knew he wouldn't stay long, but Mom was already upset for the day and waking him would not end well. He rolled over awkwardly, grunting and moaning before settling back into slumber. Rose pulled a thin, tightly jammed-in book from the bottom shelf by throwing her weight away from it, heaving it from its slot and allowing the momentum to carry her out the door and away. She nearly dropped it when she reached the kitchen, pausing a moment when she saw that her mother was still at the sink, sobbing quietly, and then stumbled up the stairs with it clenched to her chest.

It was heavy; surprisingly so given its size, bound in smooth, curiously pale leather with no lettering but a faded design that stretched from front cover to back, curling and knotting in a way that made Rose think of an octopus. She entered her room and shut the door behind her, wanting to lock it but knowing she couldn't without those ever-threatened but never specified 'consequences.' She settled for stashing the book under her bed while she got a little paper cup of water from the bathroom sink before crawling in after it, letting the dust ruffle hide her and her prize from view. The space beneath the bed was narrow and it took some maneuvering before Rose figured out how to open the book without catching it on the underside of the bed. Her first careless attempt proved the fragility of the leather; it tore easily, leaving a jagged wound down the front cover. She pushed at the leather with a finger, trying to fix it the way her mother had the paint, before turning attention to its contents.

She opened to a page numbered '1,' located roughly halfway through the volume. The pages were yellowed and worn, but the writing appeared almost new, and the pictures looked hand-painted with bright, horribly vivid colors. The first was a devil of some kind, grinning wildly as his tongue circled the waist of a frightened little boy. An archway framed the

image, crumbling and covered with ivy, and Rose traced a finger around the textured print. The caption at the bottom made no sense to her, so she flipped forward to a page marked 'XVI' and there she found.... Well, what was it, exactly? She stared, transfixed and utterly frightened. Before her, spread out on both pages was a being with the tentacles of a squid and the beaten and battered wings of a battle-scarred dragon. Large yellow eyes glowered out at her from the fragile paper and she stared it down, afraid to look away, expecting it to move. The massive hands of the creature gripped something vaguely humanoid, but the gnarled fingers hid most of the figure from view. It appeared to be surrounded by water, but that could easily have been a stain or the effects of time.

With a concentrated force of will she tore her eyes from its gaze, but the eyes followed her from page to page, daring a second look. She flipped hurriedly through half the book to reveal page 5.

Rose murmured to herself, wondering at the strangeness of it. Why would page 5 be so far away from page 1? She flipped back a little, but changed her mind and continued on toward the end of the book for fear of running into the tentacle monster again.

A few pages on a portrait stared out at her. It faced a blank page and contained the face and shoulders of a little girl, not more than 8 or 9, with wispy, jet-black hair and bright green eyes. She wore a blood red rose in her hair and she was crying. Watery red streaks slid down her face as she looked toward the blank page, eyes filled with sorrow. Rose stared in horror, feeling the same tears begin to well up in her own eyes. *No, no, not again*, she thought as she frantically wiped at her face to keep the tears from spilling, falling, eagerly joining the ones on the page, marring forever a flawless painted replica of *herself*. The book was old, older than she could possibly know, and here *she* was, staring at herself in a stylized paper mirror.

Still rubbing at her face she turned the page, trying desperately to think of something, anything that would replace that image in her mind. She recalled the tentacled creature, the devil, the images of horror and majik from the volumes she'd examined before; she found a page that was written in English and tried to read it, focusing all of her attention on sounding out words with more letters and syllables than seemed appropriate. Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore and shut the book with a thump. She crawled out from under the bed and just as she reached to retrieve the horrible tome she heard a snuffle behind her.

"Rose, honey, what were you doing under the bed?" asked her mother as she stood in the doorway, eyes puffy and leaking. Rose spun around guiltily and took her hand away from the bed skirt. "Have you been crying, too?" Mom smiled sadly and held out her arms. "Come here, sweetie. What's wrong? You know I hate to see you sad. Tell me, please? You know you can talk to me." Rose stood and moved into the embrace. She remained silent while her mother crooned, speaking softly and assuring her that everything would be ok, and Opa would be ok, and Daddy would stop drinking and they would be a family and she would go back to school soon and see her friends again and wouldn't that be great? Her mother held her close.

"Please talk to me, sweetie. I don't know if I can help, but I'll sure try, you know that."

And all of a sudden, Rose did know that. "Mom," she started carefully, "I saw a picture of myself in one of Opa's books." She looked up at her mother who was no longer tearful but staring at her oddly. The walls began to close in.

"Rose, why were you looking at Opa's books? You mean the ones in the den, right?" Rose nodded. "I told you I don't want you messing with those. They're terrible books and they'll fill your head with garbage," her voice was getting

sharper, "I knew I should have thrown them out. Why were you reading them?"

Rose sighed. She should have made something up. She shouldn't have said anything at all but now it was too late. "I was bored, and I like to look at the pictures." She tried to sound nonchalant.

Mom frowned. "But, *why*? Why do you like to be scared? That's what made you cry, isn't it? Because those pictures are scary and evil and you should be seeing that kind of filth. I don't want you touching them anymore, do you hear me?"

"They're kind of interesting, though," Rose ventured, emboldened by the absence of yelling. She bit her tongue a moment later as the fires behind her mother's eyes rekindled.

"I don't care!" she cried, "I'm your mother and I said *no!* You are not to go near that book case again, and that's *final!*" The tears had run for cover by now, and in their place was the glint of reproach. Rose shrank away, looking at the floor and muttering an apology.

"Oh, Rose, don't *do* that! Don't stand there looking at me like a wounded puppy. You're a big girl and you should know better. I'm sure I told you not to touch them, didn't I?" Rose shook her head. "Oh, for god's sake, you just hate to be wrong, don't you? You think I tell you things just to hear myself talk?" Mom stood to go. "Read one of your books. I just bought you some new ones, have you even looked at them?" Rose nodded, still staring at the floor miserably. She had brought up the image of her ancient counterpart and was focusing on that, blocking out the scolding and trying to listen at the same time so she would know when to respond. She turned and reached for the pile of paperback chapter books that sat, untouched, on her nightstand and removed the top one, glancing quickly at the cover before flipping it open and sitting down to read. Somewhat satisfied her mother left,

forgetting to remind her daughter that *'there would be consequences'* if she returned to the book case. Rose continued pretending to read until the footsteps faded away down the stairs.

Glancing again at the cover of the book, Rose threw it on the bed in disgust. It was one of those girly adventure books. She hated those.

Squirming back under the bed, she stared at the book, unsure of what her next move should be. To return it to the bookcase meant it was no longer accessible. To mention it to anyone, even Opa, was to risk the same, but if she left it down here it would watch her while she slept. She lay with her head on one arm, staring at the ancient cover and caressing it slightly, daring herself to open it again.

The book had not wanted to close, apparently, when Rose had slammed it shut. A few of the pages had wrinkled up under themselves, marking the page last visited. Rose panicked for a moment, terrified that she had destroyed yet another thing that was not hers to destroy, before realizing that no one but her would ever take the time to look at it again. Come to think of it, she couldn't recall seeing Opa reading one of his antique books more than two or three times, and even then he merely skimmed for a moment as if looking for something in particular. As if he knew them so well he didn't need to read them. She slipped two slim fingers between the last unbent page and the collection of wrinkles and lifted, slowly, dreading with not a little thrill what she knew waited for her there.

The book opened and before her were two pages written in tight script, top to bottom with only the barest of margins. The language was foreign, made up of symbols that danced and flitted in strangely long intervals from one page to the other. The writer had continued all the way to the crease in the center of the book and it looked as if the writing did not

move to the next line until it had cleared the whole of the two pages. As though it were one big page, filled with script, then folded in half and bound. Rose flipped ahead, to the end of the collection of accidental creases and bends, but still found only text. She raced in both directions from the place she'd started, but the pictures remained in hiding. She shoved the book into the corner, telling herself she hadn't wanted to find them anyway, and crawled out into the room.

The round pink wall clock ticked ignorantly away above the closet door, its hands tipped with plastic flowers and each of the numbers laced in morning glories, dancing around the edge of their pastel world. She sighed, scrunching up her mouth in a side pout. Only 30 minutes wasted. She glanced around at the dolls and stuffed toys and books and things, and hated them all. They were broken and she hadn't been the one to break them. They were used and worn and most had done time in a thrift store bin, before making their 50 cent bail. The games were missing pieces so she couldn't play with them and the puzzles were no better. The dolls were ugly and stained and the stuffed animals had little clumps of petrified fur that would have to be cut out, if anyone decided to take pity on them.

An idea presented itself, without warning, and caught Rose off guard.

The basement.

There wasn't much down there, but it was quiet and abandoned and you couldn't hear the TV or the radio her mother liked to listen to in the afternoons. Most of all it was different, something new to look at. She inhaled deeply, steeling herself for the adventure.

The hallway was not as long as she remembered; the two staircases ended far too quickly. She left her brightly lit room and without warning the basement door loomed up before her eerily, inviting her in. She brushed the splintering wood with

a palm before gripping the knob firmly and twisting. The door eased open and Rose peeked back over her shoulder- if she was going to brave this darkness then no one could know about it. Scary places are only worthwhile if no one knows.

She fingered the light bulb she'd taken from her bedside lamp and stood with one foot jammed up against the heavy door to keep it from shutting. A brush of the old bulb made it swing into reach, and with a quick screw and pull the basement was flooded with yellow light. Rose felt sure she saw things scuttle into the dark shadows lurking under the stairs, but she dismissed the feeling and slipped the door closed behind her. She ventured down, still quaking slightly at the thought of being here at all, let alone by herself and without real reason. She watched the dollhouse as she descended, waiting for a light to flicker on or for a shadow to move across a window.

Don't be stupid, she chided herself, not even mice are small enough to get in there. You're just scaring yourself. She sat at the foot of the stairs and put her chin in her hands, realizing that after all that preparation she still had nothing to do.

Rose stood and crept slowly toward the dollhouse, eyeing the strange blue flicker in the first floor window. She had to get down on all fours to peer inside, and what she saw surprised her as much as it didn't.

There, on the little upholstered couch that Opa had covered with scraps from his own couch sat one of the dolls he had made for her. It lounged with straight, awkward legs in front of a miniature television set. On the screen was a commercial for soap, and suddenly Rose realized that she had heard it all along, only you couldn't hear the real TV way down here. She watched, fascinated as the motherdoll moved from the kitchen to the den where the fatherdoll slept. She set some pills and a bottle beside him, removed the empty one, and stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do but twitching her hand subconsciously, readying it for either a slap or a

gentle caress. Eventually she left the room without doing either, completely oblivious to the looming face of her daughter watching her through the tiny windows.

A wave of fearful excitement washed over Rose. She leaned down further still to steal a look into the miniature basement window. Maybe she could see herself. In the same moment came another, more unnerving thought: would she be watching herself watching herself watch herself? She spun around toward the real basement window, but in it was nothing but dust.

Relieved, she turned her attention to Opa in his room at the top of the house. He sat up in bed, reading with his half-moon glasses perched behind the bridge of his nose, so close to his face that the little pads dug into the skin by the corners of his eyes. He was intently studying one of the thick, leather-bound books from the den, but the cover was not one she recognized. He ran his finger across the page, lips moving as he read. His head wavered slightly, drooping onto his chest.

Suddenly, a shriek.

Rose knew it was a shriek not because it was loud and piercing but because of the familiar way it reverberated through the house.

Rose jumped a little, but didn't bother to investigate the sound. The dolls were fascinating enough, but the overwhelming sensation of being watched took precedence over all else. She looked toward the tiny window that pressed against the ceiling of her basement as the high pitched cry rang out again, although this time it came from her own throat. Just outside the dingy glass hovered a face.

“Rose!”

It woke fatherdoll with a start. He grunted in irritation, repeated the call and muttered, “Listen to your mother,” before rolling over heavily and falling back asleep. The whole scene had been fascinating, even up to the recollection that her mother's voice could not carry through the soundproofed basement walls. Rose sighed. If she didn't go, they'd find her down here and the fun would be ruined. There might even be *consequences*. She smiled at her new toys and returned upstairs, clicking off the light before she opened the door. The idea had been to keep the new bulb a secret so no one would go down, but when she was plunged into a moment of stifling darkness the familiar fear gripped her and she abandoned it on its rotting cord. She darted from the doorway to erase all evidence. The call had come from upstairs, which Rose found funny. Could anyone in the whole world scream like her mother?

“Oh, shit!” Felix jumped back.

“What?”

“There's someone in there!”

“I told you that.”

“No, seriously. I mean, there's something alive in there. I mean, someone. She- she looks like you.” He stared warily at the house.

Mom stood in the doorway of Opa's room. "Rose! Where have you been? I thought you were in your room, and when you didn't answer.... Go down to the kitchen and get that little bottle in the fridge. You know, the one you asked me about. Hurry up!" and she disappeared back into the bedroom.

Rose did as she was told. The little bottle was nearly empty, and it occurred to her that there must be another one in there somewhere.... She found one, with a different label but filled with the same color liquid and took both up to her mother who snatched them away and slammed the door again. Rose sat outside, aware that something was wrong less from the look in her mother's eyes than from the fact that she hadn't been scolded.

Rose chuckled. "Yeah, I told you that." She shook her head indulgently and rubbed a spit-moistened fingertip on the tiny basement window that just barely peeked over the cement floor. "She tried to get out once. Started climbing out an upstairs window. They're an awful lot of trouble, for their size. The mom took forever to come yell at her, but it was really funny when she did. Poor little thing..." Green eyes rolled with sinister indulgence. "Oh!" she cried, "I haven't shown you the best part!"

Felix watched apprehensively as Rose knelt down in front of the outside door that led to the tiny basement. She glanced back at him, both to up the suspense and to check on his level of discomfort. Satisfied, she opened the little door with a creak. "Take a look."

She sat there for hours, maybe days, listening to the muffled shuffling behind her. When her mother finally emerged it was with a curious expression, carefully clicking the door shut and patting Rose on the head. “Do you have any old toys you want to get rid of, sweetie? We’re having a garage sale this weekend.” Without awaiting a reply Mom went down to the kitchen and threw away both bottles, washed her hands and hummed a little tune while the person on the other end of the phone call put her on hold.

Rose knew what had happened without being told, and she kept her vigil by the door until two strange men appeared and shooed her away.

He did, reluctantly. “I- I can’t seen anything. It’s too dark.” He crawled a bit closer, pressing his face against the house. “Wait, I think I see-“

Rose turned away and heard a thump that told her she was once again alone. She shrugged and stood up.

“I wonder what’s actually down there,” she mused, putting Felix’s backpack in the corner with the others. “I wonder if they ever get out.” She giggled. “They always seem to show up eventually, I guess.”

Mom fretted and flitted and tried not to grin as they wheeled out the bed, familiar lumps covered vainly by a sheet. She was visibly relieved, chattering lightly as the men struggled down the stairs, grunting and exchanging irritated looks. Rose watched from her doorway, unsure of what to think about the fact that she didn't feel much of anything. Covered toes vanished down the stairs, followed by gasps and mumbles as the bed frame scraped smudges of paint from the walls. Dad's voice joined the others briefly, a note of complaint but no clear words, as the troupe guided the bed and its occupant out to the waiting car.

Rose wandered aimlessly from room to room, trying to enjoy the emptiness. The house settled noisily and she started, but the silence was otherwise complete and oppressive, heavy with the knowledge of its source.

The worn wooden door to the basement caught her eye and she was overcome with curiosity; were the dolls still in the house? If they were would they be doing what they always did? And if they weren't....

She stood at a distance and peered in. Blackness, tinged with grey where the weak sunlight reflected off the battleship-grey walls and floors. "I wonder if it's really as dark in there as it seems." Rose smiled and shrugged again, adjusting the patch over her eye. "I think I need some new friends," she declared, and headed up the basement steps into the growing dusk.

The setting sun fought through the grime on the window and lit up the room as best it could, casting odd and uncomfortable shadows. Rose noticed with a thrill that the blue glow was gone from the dollhouse window. She smiled. There were no noises coming from it, either, but then she wasn't sure if she remembered any from the day before. She paced around the little house, afraid to look, afraid of having imagined the movement and even more afraid that she hadn't.

The thought invaded her brain and she felt silly, struck with the absurdity of what had most certainly been a dream. It was unreal, impossible. The dolls were dolls and nothing more; they hadn't moved, they weren't living replicas of her family, and this understanding made her heart sink. It was normal and right that they were simply wood and cloth and little painted faces. She should go upstairs, forget about them, clean up after the chaos so that her mother would be happy with her when she got home. But the TV.....

Almost as an afterthought, she took her brown hooded sweatshirt from its hook by the door and pulled it carefully over her head. The rough seams raked against her exposed flesh, through the thin fabric of her shirt and across the still oozing, hours-old tattoo that spread over her back, tendrils and tentacles creeping around her sides and stomach. She gasped and held her breath, wincing in pain, her eyes squeezing shut as she waited for the sharp waves to subside. She glared at the sweatshirt, wishing she could leave it behind, regretting the fact that this wasn't an option. No one could see it- any of it- until dusk.

Until the ceremony.

Doubt and confusion and frustration at her inability to trust her own memory flowed in and she sat down hard on the ground. She tried to convince herself that it didn't matter, that she could look just the same and it wasn't stupid to need confirmation. If the dolls were dolls then she had some new toys to play with. To remember Opa by..... Rose began to cry.

"What am I going to do?" she sobbed into her hands. She'd crumpled into a ball, her legs folded beneath her and her head on the floor. Despair flowed within and around and into the crevices and nooks she'd never noticed or explored. Her tears began to puddle on the floor and in the ebb and flow of her grief she marveled at the pools. It wasn't long before she dissolved again, rocking gently back and forth.

Of all the unspoken rules by which the townsfolk abided, this was of the utmost importance. Even the tattoo artist had been enlisted from out of the country so as not to endanger any of the locals. He came from somewhere in South America, a man of renowned skill and a reputation of silence. He came and went in the night, collecting his sizeable fee and bringing no stories for disbelieving friends back home.

Because of the secrecy, Rose herself had not been allowed near a mirror and had only seen as much as was unavoidable. Some spoke of agonizing death befalling those who gazed upon it before the appointed time, but the whispered fears and half-heard rumors meant nothing for her. Her fate was decided regardless.

In one of her quieter moments she peered into the house and saw that everyone was gone. No dolls, no sounds, even the space where Opa's bed had been was vacant, his room a shambles. The tears didn't well up this time but chose instead to explode, bringing with them the blood, and soon her hands and clothes were stained and messy. She tried to keep herself clean, to avoid her mother's wrath, but the more she fought it the harder it came.

She didn't hear her parents return, didn't hear her father flop back onto the sofa with a grunt and flick on the television.

She didn't hear the front door slam, or the radio flare into life.

What she did hear was her mother.

The tattoo was only hours old, but it had been weeks since Rose was met with anything but the trembling backs of gloved hands and quick, sidelong glances from the corners of bulbous, shifting eyes. The skin around her wound stung as though whipped by windblown sand, and the nod of acknowledgement from the blind old sailor she passed on her way meant everything in the world. She continued on down the hill, twitching and squirming against the brush of fabric on raw flesh.

As she walked the darkness began to close in. Clouds marched above her, merging and gathering as though preparing for battle. The breeze turned bitterly cold, whistling around and racing her into town.

Mom called out to her, roving from room to room and declaring that if she'd just up and left *there would be consequences*. The voice rose in pitch and volume as she moved higher up in the house. Through tear-drenched eyes that dribbled more blood than water Rose watched the motherdoll move through her little house, straining to hear her larger counterpart over the tiny voice that bellowed right in front of her. When the motherdoll reached the rosedoll's room, Rose had to cover her ears as the scream that issued from the tiny wooden throat rang out and she realized that her mother could be heard as well, the slightly deeper version seeping through the walls of the basement.

The tears had all but stopped now, but the blood continued as her mother's voice rang out in stereo. "Rose, where the hell are you?! If you left I swear I'll *There will be consequences youn lady come out this minute!*"

Rose smiled as a set of vivid yellow eyes set in a midnight face slunk across the road in front of her. The cat stopped a little way ahead of her, waiting.

Rose watched in silence as a car lumbered up and swerved to hit it, the ripple of gravel, a thud. It lay where it had fallen, its fur stripped rudely from its back and sides. It made no sound as Rose approached. The spine and ribs were powdered, so its attempts to look back at her were in vain. It mewled pitifully, voiceless, as the blood gurgled up through its mouth and nose in pinkish foam. Spasmodic twitching of leg and tail brought forth a further rush of froth, its breathing confined to sharp and painful bursts.

The tiny figures had lost their fascination for the moment, as Rose sat debating, with life and death severity, whether or not to respond. She could leave through the basement door, out into the backyard and away and no one would find her....

All too suddenly it became apparent why her real mother's voice reached her ears so clearly. She was standing at the basement door.

Rose looked quickly to the dollhouse, hoping to disprove this theory. Panic hit her and stole her breath and the blood flowed deep and purple-black from her ice green eyes. Her heart pounded as though it would beat her to death from within. She didn't see what her darting eyes pointed at, didn't feel the sweat drip from her palms. All she knew was the voice and its proximity to the door.

She stroked an ear to soothe it, and it blinked at her pointedly before rubbing its head in her hand and sauntering away, the muscles of its back rippling beneath the sleek black coat. It disappeared up the gravel road that wound into the hills, silent and unblemished.

Rose sat on her heels and watched it go. Her back had begun to heal itself to her sweatshirt, and it wrenched free when she stood up. The shock made her gasp, but the pain subsided quicker this time.

Arrival in town was a gradual thing, with the shabby buildings and rundown cottages slowly filling in on either side of the road, thickening, crowding, closing in. She wished vaguely that the cat had accompanied her as she stepped inside the dimly lit store.

But if she left, where would she go? There was nothing for her here, but even less out there and there was no time to empty her piggy bank or pack food or clothes or.... She felt as if her head would explode and she whimpered.

Even if she responded and went to her mother she'd be in serious trouble. If she left and was caught.... She shook her head. It wasn't an option, not really. She couldn't face her mother again, but she had to, but she couldn't and... and...

Spiros' was the only store in town. It was, for all intents and purposes, a grocery store, but all manner of bits and bobbles and oddities could be found there for a price. He always had a new book for Rose, or a fancy marble, or other pretty but useless things.

"What're yeh' doin' here?" he grumbled anxiously, jerking the week-old newspaper back in front of his face. Rose sighed.

"I came to get the purse you promised me."

He shook his head. "Got no use fer it an'more, do yeh'?" A page turned noisily.

Rose shrugged, winced. "You couldn't get it then?"

"Ne'er meant ta. Why bother? Yeh' ain' gonna use it after t'day, an' no one else in town 'ud wan' it. A waste'a time it is, then. Time Ah don' got."

"Right," she said icily, and stood before the counter staring a hole in the back of the paper, hoping he felt it and knowing he did. He coughed. She stayed put, allowing her eyes to relax enough to read the headline pasted in bold letters across the top:

Calm. The suicide's calm, sudden and complete. It enveloped her, filled her, presented a solution. She reached a steady hand through the dollhouse window.

Pop!

Pop!

The hollering stopped, mid-syllable. Both the tiny voice and its larger, shriller counterpart ceased as suddenly as they'd started.

Just like that.

Rose smiled. She heaved a sigh and settled down on the chilly concrete, legs crossed Indian-style, and spent the rest of the evening playing quietly with the tiny, headless wooden dolls who inhabited the perfect miniature replica of her big, old, empty house.

The one Opa built.

UNIVERSITY THIEF!!

ANTIQUÉ BOOK STOLEN, STUDENTS UNDER INVESTIGATION

The paper came down slowly, and a single bulbous eye peered over at her. When he saw the sweatshirt that covered her shoulders and arms he let the paper collapse onto the sticky counter. "Aw, love, Ah'm sorry. Yeh know how i'tis. What with tha ceremony t'night an' tha- he gestured vaguely in her direction, "-yeh' know.... People see yeh' in here an' they'll avoid it like tha plague. Business's bad enough," he shrugged.

Green eyes sank to the countertop. "I know," she sighed. "I just wish we could bring in someone from outside to do this, ya know? I mean, why does it have to be me?"

Opa hadn't done it on purpose, any more than Felix had, which is to say he did it consciously but entirely without malice.

He really did love her; she was his Rosebud, after all.

It was just so *weird*.

He knew, before anyone else, that the bloody tears were stress-induced. Sometimes when she cried, just cried for little girl reasons like a scraped knee or a lost doll the blood would find its way into the flow, but for the most part it meant anxiety. But he never hurt her. That was important.

She didn't like the basement. He didn't either, but for his own reasons. Hers were little girl fears and all it took was a simple request from her opa to get the first red drops to fall.

"Rosebud, can you go down and get those dolls I'm making for you? I have some good ideas today," and he'd smile indulgently.

Her shoulders would fall. "Can't *you* do it? Please? You know I'm scared."

Spiros sighed heavily and reached across the counter to take her hand before remembering himself and sitting back with a furtive glance out the window. "Rosebud, yeh' know why. E'everyone knows why. Yeh're one'a us but yeh're not from around here, so ta speak. Yeh' know?" His voice carried that awkward tone of one who is uncomfortable around children. "If Ah could take yer place Ah would, an' yeh' know that. But there's nothing any'a us c'n do. It's why yeh're here." His large eyes looked wetter than usual, and he rubbed at them roughly with a grimy sleeve.

"Ah, look'a me now!" His grin stretched wider than it had a right to. "Here, Ah don't got tha bag, but it's my store an' Ah'll do as Ah please." He handed her something wrapped crudely in a plastic bag. "Found this'n tha back tha oth'r day. Made me think'a yeh'."

“Oh, now, what’s to be scared of? A little dark, some creaky stairs? It’s not like there’s some goblin down there, just waiting for you to stumble into his lair. He can’t smell fear, or hear the steps of unsuspecting little girls. He won’t bite, I promise. Not hard, anyway. And besides, I don’t feel very well today, Rosebud. The doctor says I need to stay in bed. You’re my little helper, remember?’

And then the tears would start in earnest as he gave her a squeeze and sent her down to retrieve the wooden figures. When she returned the streaks would remain, merely shadows, and he had his fix. He’d watch her closely as she sulked in, trying to look brave and triumphant, placing the dolls on the table beside the whittling knife and pot of glue. It excited him. Not in a sexual way, not at all, but he never was able to satisfactorily explain it to himself. It was fascinating. She seemed so old, so wise and jaded.

She brightened dramatically as she removed a grubby doll from its plastic prison, with a furry black body and the head of a cat. Its eyes glowed green and gold and the one remaining ear was pointy and soft. The little pink nose was no longer fuzzy. The parts of the cat that weren’t black were grey with dust and Rose hugged it to her chest and beamed.

“Ah know, Ah know, Ah’m tha best.” There was sadness in his smile again. A group of people clustered across the street, muttering to one another and awaiting Rose’s departure. They all shifted impatiently. “An’ now, m’deah....” He looked at her imploringly, “yeh’ have yer trinket....”

She nodded. “Sorry, I’ll go.” She thanked him again at the door and left, glaring at the crowd. Eyes darted pointedly anywhere but at her until she rounded the corner and was safely out of sight.

So familiar.

The funny thing about the town was that it wasn't really a town, per say. All the people lived on the outskirts, in little rundown farming houses and crumbling shacks held together by dint of the fact that it was too much trouble to fall. They rarely left these humble abodes, save for dire emergencies and the occasional meeting or grocery run. For the most part they bartered and traded, so no one held jobs but Spiros and Anton, who ran the bar up the road. A census had never been taken, the town had never been named, there were no road signs of any kind. The state had tried once to document its existence, but the census takers returned with nothing but stories of being followed and watched by unseen eyes from the boarded up windows of what looked for all the world like an abandoned village. The townspeople continued on about their quiet, furtive existences, never wondering what lay beyond the unofficial borders of their territory.

Visitors were always a cause for alarm, even those like the tattooist who had had special invitation. When one arrived, someone would open what passed for a motel just long enough to assure the intruder that it had no vacancies, that he should try in the next town. There were no post offices, no restaurants, no gas stations. There was a church building that maintained signs of recent and regular use, but no one spoke of such things and the majority took no part in it whatsoever. Except for tonight: tonight was special.

Back in college he'd stumbled across a book while doing a bit of late-night studying. It was thin and old and thanks to a rookie library assistant it had found its way between two battered copies of *Grey's Anatomy*. Anton picked it up, grateful for a break from the monotony of technical terms and frantic memorization.

There was no title, but the volume was bound in a queer sort of leather that was vaguely reminiscent of something he had encountered before but could not quite recall....

He flipped it open, about halfway in.

People were already gathering, although there was still some time before the proceedings were to begin. Rose kept to the shadows, watching. With their hoods up and cloaks drawn against the autumnal chill there was very little to distinguish one from the other. The heavy black fabric hung uncomfortably from their lopsided shoulders, swaying with the breeze in a most unnatural way. They filed out into the street from their homes quietly and with purpose, parents dragging their small children along behind them. A strange sort of silence amplified the sounds of rustling leaves and feet as the unusual parade swelled; even the infants, few though they were, knew to keep their peace tonight as the villages fell into a specific but unspoken order.

First there were ten, then a hundred as the time drew near and those who did not leave their homes for any other occasion made their cautious ways into the throng. They filled the streets, which seemed to ache and strain at the unaccustomed traffic.

Rose, of course, was decades from birth at that time and the image crackled with unspeakable age. It showed a frail little girl with jet black hair, and fair eyes that stared mournfully out from the page. A single red rose sat in her wispy hair and deep, red tears coursed down her pale cheeks. There was no color in the image, save for the piercing red and the yellow of time. It appeared to be a sketch, roughly done by an expert hand and the minutes and hours ticked by as Anton sat, with the book in his lap, staring into her face and thinking of nothing at all. His eyes roved over the page, from her gaze to the flower that seemed just barely alive to the full lips that did not pout but carried on them the poison of knowledge and loss well beyond her apparent years. She did not stare directly out at him, but rather off to the side as though tragedy lay just over his shoulder and she wept for his ignorance.

It was this which finally wrenched his eyes away from the page, the overwhelming conviction that just behind him crouched a devil watching quietly, biding its time. There came with it a deep sense of dread that simultaneously kept him facing forward and desperately tugged him back, daring him to look, to check and be prepared, warning him not to.

He was alone.

Of course he was alone.

Rose remained in the shadows of the ramshackle buildings, darting from one to another as opportunity allowed and discreetly following the crowd. Upon arrival they stood, in peculiar formation, seemingly oblivious to everyone around them. Even the oddities, those unfortunate souls who were detestable even by the lenient standards of these people and were kept indoors for the majority of their short lives, even these were offered respite from the constant fear of being seen and heard and they embraced their freedom as solemnly as the children.

The spell, while not broken, was split and splintered as Anton turned back to the ancient tome, this time in search of a date. The pages were brittle and dry and threatened to disintegrate between his clumsy fingers. He flipped as far to the beginning as he could.

There couldn't have been more than a hundred pages between his hand and the front cover when he realized that no matter how many pages he turned, no matter how fast or deliberately he flipped the crackling sheets, no more progress was being made. It was as though as each leaf was moved, another materialized in its place. The last page proved to be just as elusive as the first.

Frustrated and confused, Anton closed the volume completely and tried to open just the cover. He whimpered at his failure, debating his own potential for madness.

Several hours of fevered searching later Anton realized that the first page he had opened to, the one with the girl, had somehow ceased to exist within the confines of the book, and longer still for him to accept it. He wondered if perhaps his frantic rifling had done it, caused the ancient page to submit to time and chaos, but he found no such evidence and the crisp leaves seemed more than willing to withstand any amount of reckless abandon. His pace slowed and he surrendered, acquiescing for sanity's sake, to the peculiarities of the book. He examined each page, one at a time, as the deep night gave way to early morning.

Tonight, the rumors were forgotten, the guarded whispers abandoned. Tonight it mattered not that a paternal grandmother had had questionable relations, nor that the subsequent generations had degenerated much more rapidly than was typical even of a deep-seated tradition of inbreeding. The bulging eyes and eerily batrachians lips were of no consequence here; tonight was the night of the baptism.

It didn't appear to be a diary, although many of the pages were written in an unprofessional hand. Some were filled top to bottom in swooping, elegant script, and a few of these he recognized as Arabic or Sanskrit. Others were squirrely or crabbed, spidery or meticulous, in Russian, German, Greek, Latin, and occasionally there appeared notes or addendums that hailed from even further east. Some of the German and Russian he could decipher; a passage from *Faust*, a quote from Dostoevsky, the name Scheherazade, but written in strangely antiquated dialects and outdated grammatical conventions. But nothing of any consequence, nothing that indicated a date of publication, or collection, or indeed any sort of connection between what little he found that was familiar. The rest was completely beyond him, although on a number of occasions it became apparent that some of the scrawls were nothing short of darkly complex formulas, equations of the unknown.

What puzzled him the most, however, was the system employed in the numbering of pages. Why this should matter in the slightest could only be attributed to a desperate grasp at the familiar in the face of so much strangeness. He could only assume it to be a random collection of writings, ordered and numbered arbitrarily, collected over thousands of years from the contributions of hundreds of hands. He attempted to catalog, to try to find order in the chaos, making notes of languages and scripts and page numbers and their relation to those before and after, but several false starts and wasted pages later he gave up. When a given page appeared exactly and only once, any patterns that might exist would evade him indefinitely.

Rose's stomach knotted and writhed. A child fell near the entrance to the stoic formation. His mother and older siblings neither spoke nor turned to look; even the boy did nothing but pick himself mechanically up out of the dirt and continue walking, never pausing even to dust himself off. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the ceremony.

What he could say for certain, and this was curious in the extreme, was that every page bore the same degree of damage due to age and the ink appeared to be of the same composition. In addition, every 31st page turn revealed an image: Portraits of devils and creatures and fiends of every make and model and horror in hasty sketch or intricate watercolor, the pigments melting together repulsively. Occasionally there were others like the little girl, with large, piercing eyes and only one or two colors to offset the illustration. Two-page sections would sometimes unfold to reveal beings of unimaginable terror, tentacle heads rearing out of foaming seas littered with inky boats and filled with cloaked figures, and although his eyes strained in the flickering lamplight and his head throbbed from confusion and fatigue Anton read on into the late afternoon, unable or unwilling to tear himself away save for those quick backward glances to ward off that which he was now certain sat in the shadows, watching him silently.

One line caught his attention especially. It was written in flowing Arabic and sat alone beneath a desert sketch, winds teasing the sand dunes to life and sending them dancing around a dark smudge that might once have been a man. It rang an uncertain bell, a couplet he'd read or perhaps written somewhere in another lifetime. Anton's knowledge of Arabic was rudimentary at best, and yet the moment he laid eyes on it he knew precisely what it said and a thrill of fear tore through him. He knew in a moment what the book was.

And finally it was time. They stopped the noiseless humming and wordless chants and stood, waiting. They waited for her. It was to begin with Rose.

Slamming the cover shut he stared at it, unseeing. His heart made a valiant attempt at beating its way out and he continually had to remind his lungs to draw breath. Trying to manipulate his usual distrust of his own memory he muttered disjointedly about being overtired, having perhaps fallen into a sort of half-sleep from which he'd only just awakened. He chastised himself, reminded his skipping heart that the book was a myth, legend at best, that it was invented by a fiction writer in a story that had never made it out of the penny magazines that were shoved behind the more respectable publications.... But he knew. He hadn't dreamed it. A tear slid down his cheek as he became gradually aware of an abominable loss of innocence, a forbidden piece of knowledge that he'd ignorantly stumbled upon.

He slid the book quickly into his bag, determined to destroy it and knowing he wouldn't. At the very least he could save another inquisitive soul from something that simply should not be.

Anton mechanically made his way back to his attic room just outside the boundaries of the university campus. His mind was as numb as his hands and feet. He placed the book beneath his pillow, undressed, and then thought better of it and tucked the book behind a bookcase. It seemed to watch him like the thing in the library while he tossed fitfully on the lumpy mattress. He fought sleep as much as he longed for it and eventually it claimed him, granting his fevered imaginings more substance than they had a right to.

He dreamed.

It began with Rose.

It always began with Rose.

It always began with Rose.

She stood atop a boulder overlooking a massive, craggy cliff. Behind her waves pounded against the shore, reaching for her and then slamming back down in frustration. Possessed of an eerie calm, Rose watched the crowd grow and fall into place in a semicircle around her. They all clutched and grabbed at their cloaks with long, webbed fingers, an act of senseless

vanity, as the wind whipped and howled itself into a frenzy around them in anticipation. Bulging eyes watched her, stuffed into oversized, bulbous heads still as marble on hunched and gently swaying forms. A few looked around carefully, unblinking eyes darting left, right, up, down, around, as though they had never before seen the world. Slowly the entire town amassed and fell into place and waited.

Her large green eyes roved over the crowd, counting heads. They rested on each person individually, and each in turn made a slight motion with what passed as a hand and bowed humbly, some trembling, until his turn had passed. The rite concluded with the arrival of Spiros, and Rose gazed off into the distance as the wind respectfully calmed. Two men slithered up, one with hands concealed

No, that is wrong. It was not Rose on the boulder, amidst the crashing waves, at the depths of the sea. It was not Rose to whom the throng paid rapt attention, whom they loved from afar with an all too convincing mask of hatred; it was not Rose, nor would it ever be- it was Sophia. Sophia's colorless hair that whipped about her shoulders, deathly pale, quietly observing her subjects with eyes as grey as the sea behind her, thrashing and thirsty for blood.

inside his cloak and the other reverently carrying an unbound book, the pages of which fluttered against his fingers. He placed it before her and stood at attention.

And so it began.

She nodded to the men, and one moved to restrain her. She bowed her head and allowed her jacket and top to be removed and her arms bound at the wrists. The first man drew a blade from his cloak, finely etched and marred by what might have been rust

but wasn't. He raised it ceremoniously and the wind and waves ceased outright as the crowd drew a collective breath. There was no sudden downswing, no grand finale. He bent carefully over her exposed back, tracing around the tattoo with delicate precision. She did not move, did not flinch. The blade made its way down her back and across her stomach, slicing only the top few layers of flesh. Across and down, creating a thin sheet of skin which he then gently peeled off. Both priests stepped away and, relieved of her means of support, Rose collapsed onto the boulder, the blood oozing thickly from her back and eyes. The attention of the crowd shifted to the priests, who had removed their hoods and raised lidless eyes to the deep grey sky,

Sophia, whose back and shoulders were stripped of their flesh, carefully, precisely, surgically; Sophia's death and life solemnly observed and ceremoniously discarded for the good of all, or so they believed.

She closed her eyes with a sigh, soft and swallowed up immediately by the whip and howl of the wind as her small, nude frame slipped soundlessly off its perch and into the raging waters below.

holding aloft the patch of skin. It dripped slightly, but a sudden, brief downpour cleaned away the blood and pus. As the subjects watched, the two proceeded to cure the skin, washing it in oils and balms in the way that ritual required. Rose watched from her place on the ground, no longer conscious of her own agony.

Lifting the book reverently they wrapped the skin around it, trimming where necessary and applying a sticky substance to the spine and inside edges. The taller of the priests smoothed it flat, held it to the wind to dry it, and then handed it carefully to Rose who now stood as she was expected to. Her body still oozing, eyes still dripping a mixture of blood and tears, she turned to face her people.

They removed their hoods and watched. With trembling arms she hoisted the book triumphantly above her head, pages struggling at their new cover. With a look of submissive, strangely joyful sorrow she handed the book back to the priests. A massive gust of wind lifted the desperate waves up and over the cliff, licking her feet in anticipation, and as they receded another gust came to replace it and gently, lovingly, carried Rose away.

Not a word was spoken, but a prayer was softly murmured in hideous syllables and as she fell she turned her head, eyes no longer gazing absently but fixed and staring

The salt set her exposed tissues on fire and she gasped, drawing the water into her lungs; she sighed out the liquid and added her own tears to the claustrophobic void. "I never learn," she thought, and gave herself up to the crush.

straight

up.

Water filled her lungs and bit by bit the sting of salt and clutch of sea began to lessen. She drew a breath and sighed again, this time with relief. Her small body floated softly downward and she allowed it to do as it pleased. All at once the pressure that surrounded her became as womb, and womb indeed it was for this was not her first birth. Nor, she knew, would it be her last and there is always comfort in familiarity, in ritual, in habit. A flash of lightning, sharp and brilliant, tugged her from her reverie and she halted her descent and observed Leviathan, set alight and burning bright in his watery sheol.

They watched her as she dragged herself to shore some time later. The waves had stilled, their fury spent, and as if in apology the soft lapping of the sea on the rocky shore aided and lifted her wounded body to her destination. She promptly collapsed, and they made no move to help. Sophia's shoulder began to bleed anew as a chip of slate dug into it but she ignored it, lying face up, eyes to her audience and filled with a hatred that lingered somewhere just beyond the comprehension of man.

Falling.

He fell through the air, far quicker than gravity could account for. He hit so hard it woke him with a start.

He lay in bed staring up at her.
“So, Felix, how do you feel?”

He nodded to her once, slowly and with purpose, acknowledging both her existence and her right to be, her sovereignty and submission and they touched, for the eternity of a moment and she, too, was set alight and burned far brighter than her companion as he circled her and carried her to shore. The movement of leviathan churned the waters afresh and they whipped her colorless hair about her face as she watched his abysmal dance. Flutes piped somewhere behind her and she listened, eyes closed now, letting the cacodaemonical rhythms move her just as the waves like the waves that had begun to settle.

An age and a half passed them by, watching with interest the battle of wills taking place in spite of itself. "Are you quite through?" inquired one of the nine, his long coat shifting against the stones. His eyes held no remorse, no pity; indeed, they showed nothing but an impassivity that would have been shocking, had there been anyone around to witness it.

Felix continued to stare straight ahead. "How do I feel? Why don't you tell me how I feel? Isn't that what they pay you for?" He crossed his arms like a child. It had been years since he'd dreamed of her, and this asshole had to go and dredge her up, again and again, day after day after day. That's all they ever seemed to discuss, in fact. That poor little girl with a name he couldn't recall and eyes he would never forget. A picture of her was taped to the low ceiling with three pieces of that cheap plasticky shit that they use to wrap gifts from Santa that are the easiest to peek at.

The flames of Leviathan brought an eerie glow to the music hanging on the water, sending bolts of lightning up out of the sea and into the sky. The idiot flutes played on, coming occasionally to some semblance of agreement before immediately disbanding once more to their own separate discordances. Sophia's body moved with them and she sang, and the song accompanied the flutes as an eel might a marching band.

Sophia's glare continued but the passion was gone. The game, however had already been won since one of her audience had spoken first, so she said simply, "You promised." The speaker shrugged, a hideous, malicious gesture, his coat hem rising only enough out of the scatter of stones to knock a few aside before settling down again. Sophia's eyes narrowed further and she repeated her accusation.

It wasn't actually a picture of her, but rather a print the doctor had found in an old book somewhere that seemed to fit Felix's description a little too well. The bottom edges were hanging away from the ceiling, distorting the image slightly, but her eyes were what mattered and they shone out clear and whole, staring into him with an intensity and a sadness that made him want to scream.

The doctor was speaking again. He had repeated his question in the same monotone two or three times now. "How do you feel?"

Her liquid voice filtered up through the water, up through the ether and out into the void, where it met with minimal approval and an abundance of loathsome dread. Control is hers at this point in the aeon, and with the slightest glimmer of noncompliance, its path would stumble from existence. She doesn't know this, however, and so much the better for creation.

Her voice rings soundless and clear as the pipers play on, dancing wildly in their own illimitable abyss.

"No one said you had to survive that. You know how this works."

Sophia nearly screamed and tried in vain to use the adrenaline rush of frustration to lift herself up. The rock in her shoulder dug deeper and the stones were stained a sudden crimson. Finally one of the nine who had yet to speak moved to lift her from the shore. He draped her gently across his forearms and followed his companions.

"I feel like I should start making shit up so I don't have to keep repeating myself." Some of the venom had dissipated and he turned his face toward the doctor. "Can I go now? Please? I really don't want to do this today." The doctor shook his head.

"I can't help you if you won't talk to me. The sooner you start to remember her and figure out what she means to you the better."

"I'm starting to think you already know who she is," Felix shot back.

Leviathan slows his motions to confer with his mistress who never ceases to sing as she conveys her wishes and mounts his slippery hide. He gently heals the livid wounds inflicted by her followers and as their trip brings them closer to the surface he returns to her the breath she surrendered to visit him as she has done countless times before.

The oozing scarlet left a trail of slime
that crept slowly down the sleeve of
his coat but if he noticed he paid it no
mind as the black clad crowd made
its way up the side of a menacing cliff
and disappeared quite suddenly into
an invisible fissure in the rock face.

“What makes you say that?”

“You know what? It doesn’t matter who she is. I probably saw her on the street once, or in the book where you found this creepy fucking thing,” he gestured vigorously at the picture on the ceiling. “She’s the representation of the mess I’ve made of my life and the suppressed memories and feelings and all that shit, right? Isn’t that what you’ll end up saying? You’ll get paid more than most people make in their entire lives and then tell me that it’s just some manifestation of suppressed something or other, and here are some pills to take the edge off.”

The psychiatrist chuckled. “You know, you’re probably right. That does seem to be the way these things wrap up, doesn’t it? I’ll tell you something, though. There’s a reason for that. The people who want to be here- in that chair, talking to someone like me, not necessarily in this place- they are the ones who don’t want a real resolution. They want the pills, but more than anything they just want someone to listen, someone who cares.”

On shore
once more she does
not sputter or cough,
does not struggle to
regain an
understanding of the
life she'd had before
that was long gone
and may as well never
have been at all.

Sophia drifted through layers of consciousness as they walked, each figure bowed slightly to avoid the scrape of the rock above. "Why do you bother with this?" she asked sleepily. The one who carried her shrugged with a sad smile she almost missed in the gloom. She smiled back and slipped out of the world for a time, reviving only momentarily as they passed into a room with impressively vaulted ceilings and ancient frescos smeared across the walls.

"Someone who is good at pretending to care," Felix muttered. The doctor shrugged.

"That too. Some people really are as boring as they fear. Not you, though," his voice seemed to wink, "you're why I got into this business in the first place."

"What did you do before this?"

The doctor paused uncomfortably, long enough to make Felix look at him, awaiting an answer.

Suddenly remembering himself, the doctor smiled broadly. "So what do you say, Felix? Will you let me have my fun?"

Felix narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Are you trying to bond with me? Because you're not very good at it."

With an effort she stands, absently brushing away the sand, scanning horizons for a sign. Generally, there would appear to her in these first few moments some ambiguous sign, something wholly unrelated to anything and everything but significant because she makes it so. Once it had been a series of black rocks, pointing northward; another time it was a bird, eyeing her with an unsettling intelligence.

Each mural, related but distinct, featured the most awesome and awful scenes ever committed to moistened plaster. Between each pair loomed a doorway, twelve in all, visually identical but imbued with a power different from its fellows. Sophia, in her haze, recoiled from them before slipping away again, comforted by the arms around her. The other eight conferred softly in the center of the room, each eyeing first one doorway then the other, then glancing at Sophia in her stupor. They nodded and argued, and finally chose. Sophia stirred as they approached it, her eyes widening. "No, no please, not again. We've done that one already, not again—" The speaker from the beach silenced her with a look.

"Maybe not," the doctor replied with a shrug, "but let's be honest with ourselves. You're stuck here, and I'm going to poke around in your head one way or the other and see what I can find. You can make things easier for yourself and help me, or you can keep fighting me. Your call."

Watching, waiting, Sophia stands and lets her bare feet curl away from the squish of sand and stone in disgust. Nothing presented itself. No birds, no stones, no shift in the wind. And she waits. She can do nothing else, not until something in this desolate scenery changes and shows her what to do.

As the day began to die she found it: a bottle, grey-green and bubbly from the breath of its creator, filled with a roll of what felt like papyrus. The designs were familiar and her voice caught and cracked somewhere between a cry and a laugh.

“Enough.” His posture held hostility and contempt for both his captive and his existence and he moved with resigned resolve toward the door, his comrades in tow. “But it’s the same!” she cried, “it’s always the same, no matter how different, it’s always the same...” her voiced faded and dropped away and with it went any say she’d hoped to have had in the matter this time.

Felix fidgeted, a look of angsty persecution on his face. “Fine. I’ll tell you what you want to hear, and maybe get an extra pill in my little paper cup every once in a while?” He gave the doctor a *hint hint* glance. “But no more hypnosis, ok?”

“I’ll take a look at your prescription and see what adjustments we can make,” the doctor made a quick note. “What don’t you like about the hypnosis?”

Felix hesitated. “Am I supposed to remember everything when I wake up?”

She woke suddenly, completely, and with a gasp as the icy stone caressed her open wound, sending the vivid and horrible dreams of earlier times and previous doors racing into the shadowy recesses of her mind. She sat up too quickly, blood that hadn't yet escaped from her back rushing to her head and making her dizzy as the tissue that had healed to the floor ripped away and the ooze began again. A sob escaped her throat in spite of herself and she crawled to the wall, leaning gingerly back and drawing her knees up to her chest. She shivered and the tears flowed more freely. With a childish snuffle she gave herself up to the overwhelming despair of this part of the journey and waited for someone to find her.

"Honestly, it's a little different for everyone. Some people remember it fairly vividly, some don't remember it at all, and for others it feels like a dream. It doesn't work at all on some people, and we don't really know why." A pause, and then, "Which category do you think you fall into?"

Felix was fidgeting again, picking absently at his fingers and chewing off the loose ends. "It's like a dream, I think. A nightmare. But not the scream-yourself-awake kind, more like the kind that ruins your day," he said finally. "It's like I'm not supposed to see it."

"What aren't you supposed to see?"

"I don't know," Felix shook his head, "something that shouldn't exist, I think. Something important."

"But you don't know what it is?"

"No."

"Are there ever other people, or just you?"

Another pause, and then, "don't I say anything while I'm under? Shouldn't you know this already?"

The doctor grinned. "So far, all I've gotten from you during the process is a bunch of talk about caves and monsters. I've been able to make very little of it so far, and I'm hoping this will fill in some of the larger gaps." Felix nodded. "So. Is it just you?"

He shook his head.

"Is it someone you know?"

Felix looked up at the girl on the ceiling. "It's not always her. I mean, it is, but sometimes she's different. Sometimes there's two of her."

"I see. And are the circumstances always the same?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, they're different every time, but sometimes they sort of feed into each other, as if it's all part of the same story."

The doctor stopped writing and just watched him, wordlessly willing him to continue.

"You said I talk about caves?"

A nod. "You're trapped, usually. No mention of the girl, though. Does that ring any bells?"

"Yeah. That's the only one that's different."

"Different?"

"It's connected, but I don't know how."

"To the other dreams, you mean?"

Felix nodded. His eyes roved about the room, unseeing. The doctor was still watching him gently, as Felix's eyes slowly refocused. "Why aren't the walls white?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" the doctor looked around.

"Why are the walls in your office grey? I never noticed that before."

"Oh," he shrugged, "the whole hospital is painted grey. Some studies have shown that harsh white can induce anxiety,

whereas a soft grey is more soothing.”

Felix nodded. “Can I go now?” he asked.

With an indulgent smile the doctor nodded. “I think we had a good session today, don’t you?” There was no response as two orderlies appeared to escort the patient back to his room. The doctor caught one by the sleeve. “Is this still necessary?” he asked quietly.

“Fraid so,” and they marched Felix out into the hallway.

“It’s not, you know,” said Felix as they walked. The orderlies ignored him. “I mean, I’ve never been violent, have I? You guys have been here a while, have I ever attacked you?” The orderlies exchanged looks, unsure of whether or not Felix was joking. Or this guy—“ he motioned with his head toward another patient who cowered away, “I’ve never done anything to that guy, even though he keeps trying to steal my meds before they get to me.”

As they hustled him into his room, one of the orderlies gave Felix a friendly pat on the back. “Maybe one of these days they’ll let you wander around by yourself. You gotta be good first, though,” and he shut the door.

Felix stood by the door for a while, staring out the high, narrow window at the glow of the dying sun. Footsteps padded down the hall and he mashed his face against the glass window at the top of the door and peered out, grinning. The nurse slapped a palm on the window playfully and slid his medication in through the food tray slot.

He examined his cup and shouted his thanks through the slot. *Nurse Alice is the best*, he thought, *always thinking of others*. He smiled and plopped down on the linoleum and waited for the bonus drug, whatever it was, to take hold. He wondered vaguely what he’d taken. It had been years since anyone had even bothered to tell him which anti-psychotic they had him on at any given time; he’d become the ward’s guinea pig when they received new samples to try, and while the experiments didn’t always end well a few of the nurses had taken to slipping him something extra in the evenings so he felt he

couldn't complain. As he sat, legs sprawled out in front of him, back against the door, he heard more footsteps shuffling slowly in his direction. The nurses and orderlies didn't shuffle.... "Anton!" he called from the floor, "Aaannnnntonnnn!"

"How's the shrunken head these days, Felix?" Anton grinned, sliding two fingers in to hold up the food slot flap so they could hear each other better.

"Getting smaller every day." Felix craned his neck to look through the slot. "You should bring the chess set over. We haven't had a good game in a while."

Anton shook his head. "Been playing a lot lately, but I can't seem to win anymore. It's getting a bit frustrating." A chuckle floated out from the room. "Don't laugh, I'm serious. I try to play each side as equally as I can but I just keep falling into the same traps, ending up with the same board set up, and then I can't remember which moves I've tried and which I haven't...."

"If you're playing me, though, you know you'll win." Anton shook his head again and a moment later a chess board poked through the slot and a handful of frosted glass pieces rolled across. A plastic chair scraped up to the door and they set the board up in silence.

"You know what's weird though?" Felix asked, fondling a pawn, "Why would they let us have a glass set? I mean, we're the safety scissor brigade, aren't we? And yet you get to keep this fancy set, and play with *me* no less, when it's just begging to be shattered and used as a weapon." He couldn't see Anton smiling indulgently as he made the first move. "Ya know?"

"Hmm. Your move." Felix moved a pawn carelessly. "Actually, it makes perfect sense, if you think about it."

"How's that?"

"*You* are the safety scissor brigade. Ain't no one out here but us chickens. And this is my set- they assume I'd tell them if you took a piece, and as long as I'm sitting here they feel like they know what you're up to. It's multi-purpose." Anton put two gnarled fingers on the head of a bishop, clear as bathwater, and then changed

his mind with a grunt. “Besides, these pieces are more of a choking hazard than anything.”

Felix sat there, thinking, his words coming out soft and fearfully. “You... you wouldn’t happen to know why that is, would you? Why I’m the...?” the question hung there, awkward and tangible. Anton let it hang, carefully moving a rook two spaces forward, grunting, replacing it, and then choosing another piece; a pawn this time. They played in silence that grew gradually more comfortable until Felix, with a smug little sound, moved his queen for the kill and knocked Anton’s king onto its side.

“Sonofabitch!” Anton’s hands flew up in defeat, bumping the chess board and knocking the pieces to the floor. There was a soft tinkle and pop as the cross on the king’s crown broke off. “Serves ‘im right,” he muttered, gathering the pieces.

Felix laughed. “Ready for round two?”

“No,” the old man sighed, “that’s enough defeat for one day. I think I’ll go nap for a while.”

As Anton wandered off to his room, the drugs began to take hold. It had been a mistake, Felix realized, taking them all at once: they weren’t mixing well. Panic set in, deep and formless and void, the sort of panic without reason, without motive. Everything was wrong, even though it wasn’t but maybe it was- *no, it really, really was*. He shouldn’t be here. They had trapped him, coerced him, convinced him he was wrong and dangerous and crazy and the next thing he knew he was curled up in the corner on the icy stone with the naked bulb glaring down at him, making himself as small as possible, hiding, willing all the wrongness away, staring wildly at the chess pieces still scattered on the floor, glinting at him. Winking.

Intrusive Thoughts

Anton sank to his bunk with a sigh. It was an elderly sigh, filled with the pain of too much life, too much time. He sat there, hunched over with his legs hanging off, feet not quite on the floor, hospital slippers giving in to gravity the way his flesh and bones had done so many decades before. His hands, with their gnarled fingers followed suit, dangling lifelessly between his knees. There was no real reason for the sigh, he realized, or if there was he couldn't remember what that reason had been. That was just as well though; he was here, in this place, to forget. *It is not wisdom which plagues the old*, he thought, *but the intimately understood knowledge that all that is happening has happened before and will happen again. And again, and again....*

Through his musings came a series of squeaks from the doorway. The first and third were from the hinges, opening and closing again; the second was lost to the third, its source hidden by the door. He frowned, slightly but pointlessly annoyed in his tired old man way. The nurses knock first. He shrugged, shook his head, and turned to his books. Lurking somewhere at the back of his mind was the reason he'd been allowed so many personal effects when the others had not; but he opted, as he always did, not to wonder for fear of finding out. Of remembering. He ran an arthritic finger along the spines of a few insipid romances and fantasies, all read and reread for their ability to distract without teasing the creeping recollections hidden in the shadows. He hated them passionately, often falling into daydreams of slitting his wrists with the pages so as to validate their existence; but anything with substance inspired the thought and introspection he feared so deeply.

"Can I help you?" He knew someone was standing behind the door, could feel them there, and his voice came out rather harsher than he'd intended. No reply. He looked up. "Are you lost?"

The door creaked open again and a grey-green eye peered in. It was ringed in what looked like red eyeliner, smeared and running as though from tears. He gestured its owner inside and saw that she was young- 13, maybe, but certainly no more- with a shock of white hair that covered half her face. She reminded him of someone, but his mind fought viciously against the recollection and he beckoned again. She stepped further in, keeping close to the door, ready to flee if necessary. "You're new here, aren't you?"

She nodded, eyes widening as she noticed the books lining the walls. "Help yourself," he said, wondering instantly what would compel him to say it and wishing he hadn't until a smile slid across her face, so wide and bright it made his soul ache. He watched as the girl approached the rows, kneeling before the first and running a loving finger down its spine. She repeated this motion for each and every volume, sometimes taking one out for examination, then carefully replacing it. He was struck with the curious notion that she was being reintroduced to long-lost friends from other worlds or previous lives. He watched her, participating in her joy, until she'd reached the end of the line. She sat back on her heels and frowned, and he frowned with her.

"Something wrong?"

She was silent for a moment. "It isn't here."

"What isn't?"

She scanned the room briefly, then slid a hand beneath the pillow, then beneath the mattress. Her face lit up again, and this time she trembled visibly. Two slender fingers pulled out a thin, leather-bound volume Anton had entirely forgotten about. Or rather, one he had desperately and pointedly tried to forget about.

There was a gasp, and then its echo, as he snatched the book from her hands as quickly as old reflexes would allow. He stuffed it roughly back into its hiding place.

When he looked up again she was standing, somehow towering over him. He asked her to leave and she did, but not without a final wicked glance from across the room; the air of innocence was gone now, replaced by something powerful and old. She shut the door carefully behind her and the silence, which hadn't really been broken but seemed somehow violated, filled in the place where she had stood.

He didn't move. He forgot to breathe. With a tremendous force of will he battled the thoughts that bubbled up from the fearsome void and, for the first time since being introduced to prescription drugs, he couldn't sleep.

The medication coursed through his body, avoiding his brain, as Anton watched the texture of the ceiling morph and twist in the feeble light seeping in from the hallway. She had known it was there, what it was. It was hers, somehow, and had called to her.

He shook his head. Absurd though it was, the impression lingered. It frightened him in ways he could not, for the sake of his dwindling sanity, put into words. His fingers itched for the book as they hadn't in years too numerous to admit or believe. He shoved them beneath his body, willing them still, as the swirling ceiling formed itself into devils and beings of the most abhorrent shapes and hues; whirling images the likes of which he'd almost managed to forget. The sheet of ice that kept the now broiling seas away from his consciousness was cracking, and he cried as he struggled to build it up, to fortify it, to protect himself. It was futile, and he knew it. And so he cried.

Morning lost a bet and begrudgingly dawned, watching Anton through the high window as he lay on the rumpled, sweat-moistened cot. The morning nurse came in, left her gift on the bedside table, and retreated again. He watched her go, debating a request for stronger sleeping pills to compensate for the hours spent

in the throes of wakeful sublime nightmare, but in the end refrained, knowing full well the dam had broken and he was beyond help once more.

“Anton! Anton, you have a-” the voice echoed down the hall and was cut off by the bang of his door. The sound made Anton jump, but he remained where he was, unwilling to properly acknowledge the intruder. He merely watched the old man as he stooped to examine the books along the wall, much the way the girl had done. Anton’s eyes moved with him as he made the rounds, taking out first one old book and then another, leafing through some and holding others by the cover, shaking out the pages.

“Sir, I-” the nurse implored, “Anton, do you know this man?” Anton ignored her. He continued to watch as the old man creaked and shuffled about the room, making louder and more passionate grunts of frustration, failing to cast even a glance in his host’s direction. He came to the end of the line and stood, scratching his head a bit and absently dropped a clump of snowy grey on the floor. The nurse rushed forward with a feeble air of authority and took the man by the arm, telling him in a firmly shaking voice that he “simply must leave this instant, or security will be notified.”

He allowed her to maneuver him from the room, but before crossing into the hallway he turned with a meaningful look at Anton. Their eyes met and the stranger smiled knowingly, disclosing an eerie and fully possessed sort of sanity for which there is no cure. This man had an aura of antiquity similar to that adopted by the girl after having the book snatched away and suddenly Anton was completely aware of the reason for his visit. The stranger turned his unsettling gaze on the nurse, who became so visibly shaken that her hand upon his arm became her means of support, rather than the method of his removal.

Several moments passed before Anton became aware of his heart beginning to beat again. He stared through the closed door, not thinking or moving or breathing. There was something, a realization in the back of his mind that he didn't want himself to know, scratching away and trying to free itself. He fought it with a meditative clearing of his mind but it persisted.

"Anton?" the whisper came from the crack that had appeared in the doorway. "Anton?"

"Hmm?"

"Oh, you're still awake." The nurse strode in, a paper cup in one hand and a glass of water in the other. "I'm so sorry about that, Anton. I don't know how he got in." She smiled as warmly as she was able and handed him the medication. "With all the excitement I thought you could use a little something extra." Anton took the pills but left the glass on the table.

Had she been asked, Nurse Alice couldn't have explained why the elderly man had upset her so much. The look he gave her on his way out of Anton's room gave her chills; there was something in the eyes, something curiously absent from the rest of his wrinkled face. There was too much time there, the eyes had seen too much. It was all Alice could do to maintain her composure and lead- or rather, follow- him through the halls to the door. She felt tiny in his presence, insignificant but blithely tolerated, filled with awe and fear and incomprehension as she walked, brushing rudely past patients and coworkers, unable to process the events of the last few minutes, let alone her own thoughts and feelings about them.

“Thank you, my dear, but it wasn’t that much of a bother,” he hesitated. “I think I knew him once, a long time ago.”

“Really?” She looked genuinely shocked. “Huh.” She turned and left, and Anton noticed that she was still trembling.

Spitting out the pills and stashing them in his mattress, Anton lay back, hands behind his head. One hand crawled beneath the pillow, gently fingering the book in its new hiding place. His mind remained pointedly ignorant of this little foray, of the index and thumb gently stroking the odd leather binding. His eyes began to close of their own accord and he drifted into the half sleep that was the only respite he could hope for now that the drugs had lost their usefulness. He could try them, he thought, it wouldn’t hurt; but deep down he knew, and as his hand continued to move in spite of him, the dreams began to filter in.

Alice checked the front of the building for the intruder, saw no one, and sank to the floor, where she remained for over an hour staring blankly at the opposite wall. She tried to regulate her breathing, to clear her mind, and in essence waited for someone to find her.

Eventually, though, when her failure to finish rounds went unnoticed and the chill of the linoleum had thoroughly seeped through her scrubs, she relaxed a bit and stood. Without a thought she checked her watch, not registering the time, and left.

Horrible dreams, filled with creatures and faces without name or human relation, hidden knowledge and horrendous truths and all manner of things and being with which nightmares are usually and unusually peopled. He tossed and turned and shrieked at himself to awaken, the bit of lucidity that remained aware of the dreamness of it whined and hollered for silence and dark. Pain and pleasure that filled his mind and spared his body save for the unconscious twitch of muscle, fearful that their host was dying, trying feverishly to awaken him with the only tool they possessed. Then, without warning as is the way of dreams, a face flashed before him and his eyes snapped open.

The block between the hospital and her bus stop seemed much longer than usual. She needed to sit, to warm her legs and butt on the bench and wait for whichever bus happened to arrive first. But the sidewalk kept twisting and stretching and straightening out again, and the little blue bench with its splatter of graffiti refused to come any closer until it was right there, jabbing painfully into her shins. She made a strangled sort of sound and rubbed them, boarding the bus when it arrived, never bothering to check the line or destination. She flashed her bus pass to the driver, hand trembling. The driver gave her an odd look before slamming the door and punching the accelerator, sending her flying onto the lap of a grizzled old man in a wheel chair. Her left hand, sent out in front to break her fall, landed squarely on the invalid's knee. Cupping the stump in her palm she felt the scrape of slightly protruding bone and it made her flesh crawl as she stumbled to the back of the bus. She could hear the laughter of the amputee from where she sat, could see his shoulders vibrating softly.

She hovered above him, watching, one-eyed. “Can I have these?” she held out her palm, cradling the pills he’d stashed in the mattress.

“Wh-what? Oh, yeah, sure.” A sleep-clearing shake of the head made him think better of it and he said, “Only two, though.”

“You’re afraid I’ll OD, aren’t you? That’s what everyone thinks here. They won’t give me any and I haven’t slept in....” she cocked her head and thought. “Since I got here, at least.”

“You haven’t been here all that long, though.” He sat up and tried to force away the nightmares that still tingled at the edges of his mind.

She gave him a look and popped some of the pills into her mouth. Swallowing fiercely, she smiled and replaced what was left in the mattress. She turned to go.

“Why can’t you sleep?” Anton sat with his legs over the side of the bed, one hand still absently fiddling with the book under the pillow.

Alice’s eyes closed as she leaned back into the stained and threadbare seat. She calmed her heart and focused her thoughts to the inside of her eyelids, veins showing up a vivid orange from the sun beating against them, trying to get in.

The bus driver cleared his throat harshly and with purpose. It took a number of repetitions to arouse the sleeping Alice, but once her eyes fluttered open his countenance softened. “End of the line, Miss. Didn’t know you were still on board, or I’d have woken you at the last stop.” Alice sat forward and looked out the window into the dingy garage.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, pushing past him. She nearly fell off the last step, scanning the garage for an exit.

“I have nightmares, sort of. I think they call them night terrors. Don’t know if that’s what they are, but that’s what they call them here.”

“What kind of nightmares?”

She came and sat next to him.

“I don’t know, really. I mean, I can never remember them when I wake up. All I know is I feel very....”

“Impotent?”

A pause. “Yeah,” she nodded.

They sat in silence a while, Anton scrambling to revive the conversation before she clammed up again. “So, you don’t remember any of it? Ever?” Her hair swung lightly as she shook her head. “And they’ve tried things like hypnosis, medication, all of that?”

The haze of sleep kept the frantic thoughts at bay until she arrived home, but the wrinkled face leaped again to mind the moment she shut the door. Time and distance had relieved most of the fear she had felt at the hospital, but the thought of the strange old man still sent anxious shivers through her as she struggled to relax.

The screams and taunts met my ears forcefully, in spite of the thick walls. Shifting restlessly on my straw mat, swatting at persistent flies and obstinate bits of straw poking through the sackcloth, I struggled to ignore the hideous sounds and their horrific implications. Three days. Three days had arrived and expired since last sleep had claimed me, for one reason or another. My bones ached loudly and my eyes burned with dust and fatigue. *Too tired to sleep now.* My limbs flailed restlessly in an attempt to either wear me out completely or keep respite tucked into the inaccessible corner to which it has been banished. Often as not an attempt at help does just as much harm as good, and vice-versa.

She shrugged.

He was getting frustrated. He desperately wanted her to stay, but didn't know why or how to make it happen. "How long have you been here?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"A week, maybe. Time doesn't mean very much when you can't sleep, ya know? Everything starts kind of bleeding together.... Can I see that book again?"

To the best of her knowledge his presence had gone unnoticed until she'd seen him going from patient to patient inquiring about Anton, trying to find his room but not necessarily him. She's stopped him, asked for his name and how she could help but as she did so the obsessive compulsive man who'd monopolized the Lego table smiled eerily and pointed, giving the room number in soft, even tones that were unnervingly out of character. Alice had followed the stranger, trying to detain him but for whatever reason found herself unable to do so.

A grunt of utter frustration tore itself free and I leaped to my feet, tossing mat and blanket violently against the wall. One hand swatted and scratched randomly as I moved toward the door, resigned to joining my neighbors in their hideous revelry. The slab of wood serving as barrier between them and me tended to stick at this time of day and a sharp tug was required to open it; in the spirit of orneriness the week had adopted, it instead decided to jerk open without any of the usual resistance and I nearly shouted as a man, horribly bloody and burdened, collapsed across the threshold. I moved back, allowing him to fall, and was seized by the rage of the insomniac.

Startled, Anton jerked his hand from the book's hiding place. "What for?" He bit his tongue, afraid the conversation would end. "It's just an old book, worth nothing but sentiment. And besides, the whole thing is written in dead languages, some of which don't even have names, as far as I know, and...." They exchanged looks. "That didn't dissuade you, did it?" She chuckled and shook her head. "Fair enough. But-" he reached out and tilted her chin towards him, "looks like those pills are kicking in."

As she sat she tried in vain to pinpoint mannerisms, words they'd exchanged, anything that might be the cause of her irrational fear. Not only could she recall no specifics, she could also no longer remember his face. All that was left were vague blurs, colors, a shadow of the original fear; and then the vicious jangling of her alarm clock in the other room, signaling the start of a day she hadn't realized had found her already.

"Go where you belong." I commanded, not entirely feeling the force with which my directive was given; his life oozed out into my home and into the wood, staining forever that which I'd worked half a lifetime to call my own. My indignation swelled noticeably with his reply, though truth be told I hardly heard the words as I tried to shut the door on his weak and trembling form. One of the crowd moved to help him with his wooden burden and I watched them go, the breath coming hard and fast through my nostrils.

She pulled her chin out of his hand and smiled, blinking heavily. “I guess so. But just a quick look? Please?” He sighed, and caved.

She grasped it carefully, lovingly, caressing the cover with one hand and gently turning the pages. And then, as every thought in his head ran mute and cowering into unused corners of his mind, she began to read.

She groaned, looked at the Felix the Cat clock that ticked softly above her, its eyes casing the room. With a tremendous force of will she stood, stretched, and got ready for work, savagely silencing the alarm clock on her way to the bathroom.

The bus driver was the same one from the day before, and they exchanged embarrassed looks as Alice showed him her pass and he waved it away. Of course he remembered her. In the handicapped spot sat the amputee, winking at her the way an inmate might from inside his cage; she brushed past him and sat at the back.

Nothing like manual labor to induce sleep. Until the final glimmer of light passed out of the heavens I toiled with coarse brush and bucket, rigorously scrubbing the scarlet stain on my doorstep, the earlier exchange smoldering in my mind.

Or, rather, my half of it followed me around; it ached and burned and swelled from my chest into my ears and cheeks. Why had I been so cruel? Three sleepless nights were nothing when compared to his lamentable fate for the crime of- what, exactly? He was good, and kind, and wise beyond his years. A bit mad, perhaps, but no degree of mental instability warranted that to which he had been fated. And likely as not- it was this that bothered me most- my admonition was one of the last sentiments expressed to him.

She mouthed the words at first, barely breathing. A line on one page, a paragraph on the next, skip ahead a ways and then she found her voice. The sounds were alien to him, fearfully old and bearing no immediate resemblance to any language he could remember encountering, blending and bleeding through her like prayer. She closed her eyes at one point, running her slender fingers down the page as though reading the indentations. He watched her, transfixed, until she closed the book and sighed contentedly. “Thank you,” she said, and rose to leave.

A man, seated on a bus stop bench, watched idly as the bus lumbered past. His gaze caught Alice’s and held it and she leaped to her feet as quickly as the speed of the vehicle would permit. She hollered at the driver to stop, that he’d missed someone, and he eased on the brake while trying not to watch her approach in the mirror.

Idle, futile guilt drove the scrubbing brush back and forth with increased determination and speed, vainly attempting to erase my shame along with his blood.

I watched that night pass me by, eyes held open as if by invisible threads. As I lay on my straw mat, watching a host of stars filter past my line of sight, I was overcome with the inexplicable and unquestionable certainty that not another moment in my life would make an appearance without my bearing conscious witness to it. The tears I couldn’t suppress did not relieve my exhaustion.

Three days later the city buzzed with whispered rumors and half-heard tales of empty tombs and eternal damnation. It’s hard to apply one’s mind to such things when one has not slept, but it was early that morning that my cruel directive was brought again to my attention, as was his hoarse reply.

With effort he found his voice.

“Go get some sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up and we can talk some more, ok?”

She flashed him a goofy grin.

“Ok, goodnight. Or morning, or whatever.” She giggled and wobbled toward the door. “Woah, these *are* potent.”

“Oh, hey.”

“Mmm?”

“Don’t tell the nurses where you got those. Don’t even tell them you took ‘em, just make ‘em think you’re sleeping on your own, ok?”

“I will stay here and rest, but you will go on until I return.”

He opened the doors, visibly relieved to be rid of her, and she hurried after the man who was now moving away down the street. She called after him, wondered why, and began to jog. The man turned, smiled, and to Alice’s surprise he stopped and waited for her. Her steps slowed and the fear threatened to rise up once more, but when she reached the bench on which he’d sat his smile put her slightly more at ease. Now he was nothing but a genial old man, happy at the prospect of having someone to talk to.

He did not, however, seem all that eager to begin. They stood face to face for some time before her discomfort got the best of her and she cleared her throat uncomfortably. The realization that her behavior recently had been ridiculous was painful; this man was no one. He meant nothing to her, and now she would be late for work. But she’d called to him, and pride would not allow her to simply turn and go. “I-” she stopped, and then started again, “I- I thought you were someone else,” she finished lamely and moved to leave.

“Sure.” Her sleepy, little-girl smile overtook him and that feeling of familiarity returned. He knew her, had known her for ages immemorial. The feeling confused him vaguely as he listened to her retreating footsteps.

Anton’s head hit the pillow again, but before his eyes were allowed to close, he sat up and shoved the book into the pillow case, way to the end, and then flipped the pillow so that the open side of the case faced out into the room. *This damn thing’ll be the death of me*, he thought wistfully. *It’ll drive me mad and then it will kill me. I don’t even know who I’m hiding it from.*

His chuckle from behind chilled her blood and caught her breath. “‘S that so?” The old man mused, “and who is it I remind you of, eh? A sneaky uncle? The grandfather who always stole your toys on Christmas and pinched your cheek?” He laughed full out this time, long and deep and Alice could feel the fear from the day before welling up again. She walked faster, eyes dead ahead, the slapping of her feet uncomfortably loud on the sidewalk. She put as much distance as possible between herself and the old man, and yet when he spoke again his voice was as close behind her as before.

The man had been known to speak in quips and riddles, but his words sent ice through my veins and stopped my heart mid-beat. I knew not what such words might mean, but my nights echoed with his voice and the mysterious implications thereof resonated through each day. I suspected immediately that his words were responsible for sleep’s careful elusion, and wept bitterly over the three days prior and the last chance of sleep I had rudely squandered.

God, I hope it kills me.

He lay down for the final time that night, wondering vaguely if the old man from before would make an encore appearance (*I suppose I'm hiding it from him*).

"Do you know why you're so afraid of me?" he asked.

Her feet abandoned her then and she stopped. Her head shook but she did not turn.

"Well, I could tell you, but where'd be the fun in that?" He laughed again and suddenly Alice knew she was alone. Resisting the urge to look behind her she began an awkward half-run, fiercely trying to focus her mind on the hospital, to choke out the intrusive, persistent thoughts.

A patch of icy wet on his cheek startled Anton from his awkward half-sleep. Wiping away the tears that coursed down his face, his lips curled into a rueful smile. After so many centuries, so many self-reinventions out of necessity rather than desire, so many lost loves and opportunities realized simply because there was time, ever so much time to be disposed of- after so long the words still rang sharply in his every dream and conversation, in every silent, introspective moment and slice of solitude, whether he consciously recognized them or not. No invention of god or man held more value than the sorts of sedatives they handed out like candy in this place. They made the voice easier to ignore.

Relaxing his mind he allowed it to return to Sophia, and her inexplicable knowledge of the book. He watched her lips moving, heard her voice, tried to pin down as many dialects as he could, and make sense of the rest. Tried to reason with himself, to rationalize her familiarity with words that no living being should know.... *Sophia?* She hadn't told him her name. Where had he gotten 'Sophia?' He shook his head to clear it, unwilling to challenge his mental blocks, sturdy though they were. His usual brand of sleep claimed him then, and the nightmares from before were now mixed with human faces he recognized but did not know. The walls that protected him were strong, but there was a breach; and like a child with a bruise he couldn't help but poke at it. He wasn't so afraid anymore.

The heavy door to the hospital opened and closed in one swift motion and Alice leaned against it. She felt as if she'd just fled for her life, though she acknowledged how stupid that sounded. The old man hadn't followed her; she told herself this, sharply, wanting to peek out the high window to make sure but knowing she couldn't. A sudden flash from the Twilight Zone, that scene of the ape-like gremlin peering in though the window on Captain Kirk's plane made her smile and she stepped into the lobby.

She stopped cold.

He hadn't followed her.

He'd beaten her there. _____

One hand dug
beneath the
mattress where
he hoarded the
tiny white life-
preservers; or
life-suspenders,
perhaps. Tiny
capsules that
provided a
moment or two
of respite from
his damnation.
He popped one
between his
lips, relishing
the bitter taste
and closed his
eyes with the
same grin of
resignation
twisting his
wizened mouth.

The old man sat in a waiting room chair, one leg crossed over the other, hands upon his knees and a grin on his face. He waved at her, chuckling through his nose. She gasped and clutched her neckline like a silent film star, racing from the room without another look. She felt stupid as she did it, could see herself rushing off like some damsel in distress and yet it was beyond her control and she didn't stop until she reached the patients' rooms.

"Have you done your rounds yet?" The head nurse bustled down the hallway with a clipboard in one hand and a ballpoint pen in the other. "Well?"

Alice shook her head and accepted the clipboard. Giving it a cursory glance she opened the first door, realized she didn't have the meds to dole out, and went to the nurses' station to collect them.

The waiting room, nearly empty, was pointedly avoided as she did her rounds. She felt him watching her, sensed his awful grin on her back. His feet shuffled softly and she stiffened. The pills were in their cups and the cups on their tray and Alice made a beeline back to her patients, the little colored pills rattling against each other.

With empty cups and regained composure, Alice made her way back to the waiting room and the uncanny visitor. With poorly feigned courage she strode toward him, and asked in clear, even tones that only shook a little, "Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

He chuckled. "So formal. But yes, in fact, there is." He motioned to the girl sitting next to him, who had somehow gone completely unnoticed before. She was about 13, give or take, with jet black hair and the greenest eyes- eye- Alice had ever seen. One eye was covered by a black felt patch. Across

her shoulders hung a man's coat, heavy wool and black, making her look even smaller than she was. She tugged at it, trying to cover her arms. She looked like she'd been crying.

Feeling her nurse's instincts kick in, Alice turned to the old man with professional confidence. "Are you her guardian?"

He shook his head, cocked it at the thought, and then nodded instead. "I guess you could say that. I found her this morning, with a note pinned to her lapel that said 'free to a good home.' I simply can't afford another one right now, you see, so I brought her here. Well, first we went to breakfast, and I swear to god you would not believe how much food such a little thing can put away. Never said a word, either, except 'thank you' when I paid the bill and a few minutes ago she asked if I'd ever been to Prague. Odd little bird, this one. She'll fit right in."

"So you don't know her name?" Alice was struck suddenly with the girl's uncanny resemblance to another patient, the name of whom escaped her.

The old man shrugged. "Didn't ask."

Alice shot him a look she was glad he didn't see.

"Honey," she said softly, bending down to the girl's eye level, "can you tell me your name?"

Silence.

To the old man she said, "So you don't know anything about her at all?"

"Nope, not a thing. She didn't wanna talk, and I didn't wanna pry. I mean, we've all had those nights that end with us naked in the bushes--"

Caught off guard, Alice faltered a moment and sighed. "Well, I'll get the doctor and see if we can't get the paperwork started." She went to page Dr. McKay, filled with a self-

satisfied smugness, while the old man muttered something about bureaucracy after her. When she returned he was as genial as ever, an eerie smile spread wide across his face.

“Gonna get her all doped up and turn her loose?” Alice glared at him. “Well, either way I guess my work here is done. Unless, of course, you’ve got a spare cot and some pretty little pills to toss my way....” He winked.

“Thank you, sir, for bringing her in. We’ll take it from here.”

“Can’t blame a guy for tryin’,” he smiled as the doctor entered, the latter reacting much the way Alice had the day before, and then the old man walked briskly from the building.

Dr. McKay eyed the new patient thoughtfully, observing her silence and the livid scratches that had hidden under the coat sleeves. He looked at Alice, “Do we know anything at all?”

“No, sir, not a thing.” She repeated the old man’s story.

“Prague? Huh....” He mused for a time. “Ok, well, set up the empty room at the end of C hall, make her comfy, you know the drill. I’ll be able to see her in an hour or so.” With that the doctor strode off, eager for his appointment with Felix.

**Of Dwarves
&
Dreams
&
Darkness**

I do not dream.

That is not to say
that I simply fail to recall
my dreams, as learned
men are wont to assume;
I quite honestly do not
dream.

My nights are
filled with a dark abyss,
horrible, penetrating,
tangible. No creatures
inhabit it, no beings mar
it with life and yet there
is a malignancy
contained therein that
finds me gasping for
breath each dawn and
fighting the inevitable defeat each night.

He finds himself lost and begins to panic. *I've been
here for ages, it seems, and longer.*
*I grew up here, on these streets and in these homes. I
see them and I know them but the context is wrong
and the people are wrong and I, too, am wrong.*
Where am I?
The streets wound around and back upon themselves
and he twists with them, now running, now plodding
along, brooding.

He scratched idly and without conviction a
place beneath his chin which did not itch,
may never have itched in all its time as a
part of his face but was being given a good
scratch nonetheless.

The town was strange,
possessed of an awkward,
anachronistic grace. I'd been here
before, but only in dreams; how
strange to encounter a place one has
never seen properly in pictures or in
life, but only through the haze of
sleep. I felt at home, somehow, as
though it were my dreams
themselves that had fashioned my
surroundings.

I did dream, once, and
once again and for centuries;
vivid, near-lucid nocturnal
sojourns into the existence of
men and beasts whose faces
and forms registered clearly and
stayed with me throughout my
days and subsequent nights.
Wars and famine, plague and
death; hope, life, birth,
childhood, love. Each scene and
story I lived as well as observed,
fully and in excruciating detail.
So chaotic and intense were
these dreams of mine that my
days were all but wasted, spent
in vain recuperation, only to
have my mind and body once
more shattered with the fall of night.

At the corner where the newspaper
stands
stood
never did
a midget, awkward and bent, dancing to unseen music
by an unheard band, rocking and swaying his twisted
body in time with the rhythm of the silent streets.

He wore a suit, like a pimp, but with
no feathers or fur and he saw nothing
and heard nothing save the music to
which he danced that existed no more
than did he.

It is not entirely unheard of,
in myth and legend and bedtime
story, for dreams to take body and
impose themselves upon reality, to
claim themselves to *be* reality and
reality as we know it to be illusion.
Not an uncommon idea at all.
Perhaps I am merely victim of a trite
and infertile imagination, a dream or
hallucination that, were it set down
on paper, would be laughed out of
any self-respecting literary circle.

Yes, of course, I spent a fortune on caffeine (and varyingly more sinister substances), in an effort to maintain consciousness long enough to regain strength. It is from this curse I could neither escape nor, oddly enough, will myself to truly wish to do so. No genius, god, or backwoods simpleton can resist such exquisite agony as that over which he feels himself in control.

Further along and around a few corners and down a three lane alleyway lay a cat with her kittens, making no sound at all as their blue eyes hung open, seeing eternity but ignoring listlessly the present.

Their mother licked and groomed and fussed and cooed as his footsteps echoed noiselessly against the bricks of the buildings he knew intimately not at all. He walked on by and let her be and with determination ignored the kitten scampering along behind. Momma cat seemed not to notice as her little one wandered away on wobbly broken legs, eyes staring off into forever.

Regardless, I'll set it down here, for my own edification; to provide some proof to myself on my dying day that whether or not it happened in truth it was at very least a story to which I could lay claim, pathetic though it may be.

I was once a voracious reader. Indeed, that is not an adequate description; I read anything and everything I could procure, from insipid fantasy to impossibly dense non-fiction. I was impartial to writing styles, subject matter, depth, or literary merit. It mattered not if the writer had done his research satisfactorily, or if the result was something akin to a brilliant scientist clumsily mimicking Shakespeare. Because of this, my initial conclusion regarding the dreams was that I was victim to not only an overactive imagination, but also far too large a store of material to be processed in 8 measly hours a night.

The dark filled in where the street lamps failed, casting as many bright spots as the light did shadows. And still the streets wound and curved and he knew all at once what was wrong... The buildings flowed one into the other and blocked out the light and sky and the space and the town until all one could see was that which had gone just before and that which stood immediately ahead.

But then, even this was an aspect of the town in which he'd lived and went no distance at all in explaining his lack of bearings. *Being lost in one's own town is akin to losing direction in one's mind*, he mused as he wandered.

The name of the place was unknown to me, and the alleyways, signless and narrow, wrapped quick and irrelevant around the absurdly thin buildings perched on their precarious mountain peaks. There were no proper streets; only the alleys, and along them sat doorways, oddly squat and seemingly disused for centuries or more, their paint chipping and wood warping into monstrous parody.

Unfortunately, as time passed and the dreams grew more detailed and intense, I came to realize that somehow a growing portion of them held no relation or relevance to anything I had previously read or, indeed, experienced in any capacity.

A peacock, in full blackwhitegrey regalia stood in his path and hissed and rattled like a raptor, squawking and diving at the kitten that had managed to toddle ahead of him.
The bird, ferocious and huge, collected from its tiny prey an ear, an eye, a bit of spine and rattled away in irritation as the kitten continued to mewl and wander lifelessly.

Stopping to examine its quarry, the bird was easily overtaken by its victim and disappeared down the kitten's tiny throat in one deft gulp.

It looked, too, as if no feet save mine had ever touched the cobblestones. At the time this struck me as absurd, for I knew the place to be inhabited, but the paths remained staunchly unconvinced.

The silence was complete and oppressive as I wandered, relieved only occasionally by the quibbling of unknown birds and the scratch of unseen beasts. A cat revealed itself to me, black as night and sphinxlike as it perched atop the gate that served as both exit and entrance to the city. I stood for a time, wordlessly conversing with the creature, and became aware of more than its mismatched eyes observing me. The cat's stoicism I took initially to be a warning of sorts, a soundless supplication that I leave, but a soft purr corrected this, and I was made to understand that the creature not only accepted, but welcomed me into its home.

The real terror came the day that I purchased a novel, just released, the content of which I knew absolutely nothing about. I was unfamiliar, too, with the author, as this was his first publication, and none of my friends, colleagues, or the literary critics I followed had so much as a shrug to offer in its direction. I sat down eagerly—such ignorance of a writer and his work was a rare treat for me— and began to read. Tears filled my eyes and a sense of impotent frustration overtook me as I realized that I had, indeed, encountered the story before; but it was more than that. I knew it front to back, word for word, scene for scene; as though I, myself, had penned it.

With its bits held delicately in its soft pink mouth, the kitten curled up inside the satchel carried by the traveler to await its screaming, sticky birth.

He walked on, no longer willing to hurry or run as the scenes and streets and buildings and absent people repeated themselves in the radiant dark. A cemetery loomed up on the right for the third- or was it fourth?- time, and this time the wrought iron gate stood open, beckoning, and he stepped through it and into the gaping maw of the dead and sleeping.

As I moved to stroke its back it leaped away with a hiss; tolerated though my presence was, I could expect no special treatment and no visitor to a foreign land can hope to offend the patron god and leave with anything but a deep and abiding gratefulness for his life. To my relief the cat accepted my bowed apology and bade me follow him deeper into the city.

And then, later that night as I fought back sleep, I realized: that story, down to the minutest detail, had been the substance of my dream from several weeks prior. Unsettling as this was, I determined to seek out other books about which I knew nothing. Whether to test my theory somehow, or merely to assuage my then unnamable fears, I undertook this arduous task and found several such novels and historical accounts. From stylized science fiction futurity to highly educated guesses concerning life in ancient Babylon, there was something familiar about them all, and several- far too many for comfort- were precise transcriptions of my dreams.

A phone, attached to the outside of an elaborate above-ground tomb rattled shrilly and the traveler spoke with the caller for some minutes in hushed, sharp tones. Replacing the receiver, he stood and looked about him, breathing deeply. One hand made its way into the satchel to stroke lightly the breathless lump within and a second sigh escaped his lips.

The world crystallized, clarified, found the space in which it fit and all appeared and felt as it should be. Placing the satchel beside him, he settled down beneath a willow tree to watch the kitten play.

Every so often he would pause, as though for my benefit, allowing me to catch up or observe a building or bend in the road that held some dimly realized significance. It struck me gradually that there were no trees of any kind to ease the monotony that by all rights should have been but somehow wasn't. There was no time to ponder this, however; the stony feline countenance oozed impatience.

It was shortly thereafter that I stopped reading altogether. The pleasure I once found in the written word no longer justified the anxiety that had come to accompany it. I sold my rather expansive collection, and for a time reveled in the sudden emptiness of my apartment; gradually, however, the same phenomenon appeared in music, movies, television.... Even conversations with neighbors, but that wasn't until later. To know one's acquaintances more intimately than they know themselves without explanation is a horror I cannot fully express.

The money acquired in the sale of my media eased the financial crisis I eventually found myself in; because the dreams began to waste me to such an extent, to so completely destroy my waking time, that I was fired from my job at the university, lost my car.... In hindsight I have no idea how it was that I managed to keep my apartment.

The buildings could easily be likened to those of classical Europe; however their construction also contained a strangely Southwestern American flavor. Perhaps it was merely the pale beige of the walls that brought to mind the adobe of home, for the longer I pondered them the more the structures came to resemble equally each corner of the world with which I was familiar, if only from photographs, as well as some on which I'd never laid eyes.

It was as though the town was the ultimate merging of every culture and architectural style in history; or else it was this place from which they all derived. Certainly the town possessed an aura of antiquity. Of course, all this kept the division between dream and reality carefully and thoroughly blurred.

I wish I could say I remembered how it began in the first place. Was it a drug I took, or a trauma? Some personal, earth-shattering event that rocked my sanity and opened my mind to what I had come to believe was the whole of existence? There isn't a theory I haven't debated, pondered, discounted and revisited. I have had time, so much time, to do this again and again and again and I am no closer to explanation.

In any case, after all this desperate introspection I eventually stumbled upon the notion of composition, of writing down my dreams. I've no idea why the thought eluded me for so long; to write, to set down in ink the infinite tales battling for dominance within my aching skull. The stories that, once seen, refused not only to be unseen, but forgotten as well.

All at once I realized I was alone. For how long, I hadn't the faintest idea, but the cat had vanished. It occurred to me to wonder why I'd arrived in the city to begin with- and *how*- for our tour had brought to my attention the fact that the entire city was built upon a peak or a series thereof with no readily discernible way down or out. Even the entrance gate faced a sheer drop on one side, just as the narrow roads often did. Again, the thought of dreaming; but there was something in the solidity, the continuity of the place, that I couldn't quite reconcile. I was, however, certain that nothing was missing that logic would dictate should be there, with the exception of people and trees- or any sort of life, save the cat and myself- and these holes, these missing pieces, somehow fit in with the grand scheme of the place. An acute sensation of claustrophobia took me and I stood at the edge, attempting to peer down through the mist that clung to the mountainside.

Once the thought revealed itself it would not be quieted, but fought with more ferocity than any of the dreams themselves. The day I began the first volume- one of thousands, tens of thousands- my soul cried out in relief while my fingers throbbed; the stories I'd committed to paper had been released and a single handful of sand removed from the illimitable desert beneath which I'd been buried.

Subconsciously I awaited some disturbance from my reverie, the vertigo brought on by staring into an impossible void, but none came. I shivered.

The temperature had dropped suddenly, as with the approach of night, but the twilight had remained unchanged since my arrival. I wondered vaguely if I had found my way far enough north in the world to have escaped the 'normal' shifts of day and night; Norway, perhaps, or Alaska. The more I stared into the abyss the further my mind wandered, and I began to ponder the idea of man's belief in things such as nightfall and dawn, his expectation of the shift from light to dark and back; is this where such things found their origin? In the expectation of their occurrence? The townspeople, if they existed, had apparently lost interest in such things, being otherwise occupied, and the process merely gave up for lack of an audience. Perhaps one man's attention was not enough to cause it to resume.

I shivered again, more violently this time, and began to move in search of warmth. The sudden chill lost some of its bite deeper within the city, but the doors that refused to open caused me no small concern.

My days became thus devoted, desperately trying to gain headway. What little money had not been spent on pills and the odd scrap of food was poured into my supply of pen and paper; ventures outside to procure these things were exceptionally painful. So much wasted time. My hands grew numb and obedient as I switched from one to the other, hours, days, weeks on end, in an effort to provide them relief without slackening my pace. The shelves of my small room grew choked with stolen notebooks and loose pages roughly bound. I never read over my work, never checked for spelling or continuity or form, for once the images drained away onto the page I was free and felt no desire to revisit former dungeons.

I continued to walk, and with each step the sheer and sudden drop-offs became more numerous. Rickety rope bridges spanned some of the chasms allowing access, however precarious, to other quadrants of town.

A ferocious wind whipped and howled up from the depths, and more than once nearly succeeded in removing me from my feet. My bones began to ache and then numb, joints stiffened and steps faltered along with hope and the joy I'd initially felt at finding myself in my city.

It was with unspeakable elation that I noticed a door, less ruined by time and weather and more forgiving of my plight; it allowed me entrance, and with a cry of relief I felt a delicious warm breeze from within. On it floated the subtle scent of sleeping animal flesh and a trace of what my disoriented mind took to be food.

Years forgot me, holed up in my garret, situated atop the now curiously deserted boarding house. Perhaps that was why no enraged landlords had appeared demanding payment. It was not, however, a thought I dwelt on for long, as one by one the clasps of my bondage were loosed and the reprieve, though experienced only during and immediately following my writing marathons, was immeasurable. It was some time before the consequences became apparent, but until the last they failed utterly to faze me.

I leaped inside, pulling the door tightly behind me, and it was only when my limbs began to thaw and my joy to dull that I noticed the annoyed squawking of angry birds. I found myself on a stone path, surrounded by a wall of mesh that reached from the floor to a few feet below the ceiling then over my head. The birds were separated, one species from another, but this appeared unnecessary for as I watched they seemed to be conversing; noisily but with no trace of ill-will except toward me.

The wind howls like a siren through the treeless, forested alleys. At times it sounds like an air raid and I watch silently as people run for cover through deserted streets. Other moments reveal a quality in the wind that makes it sound like speech; backward, screeching, subliminal. The rain begins to fall, apologizing softly to the sidewalk as the drops hit and die.

A tangible river of emotion coursed through my being and found release in my pens, every sentence known to man both past and still to come and I began to embrace them, now that their method of dispersion was so familiar and effective. And still I dreamed, every possible permutation of each conceivable circumstance, whole continents of men lived and died in my nights and found peace in my days.

The zoo is massive and unguarded as the men in uniform stroll along and light up again. I watch them pass and move in deeper, my steps echoing and giving nothing away. The buzzing of the beasts grows as I watch and they whisper forbiddingly, eyeing me.

The rain continues in gentle torrents though not of its own accord, giggling at the occasional resentful remark sent heavenward via the piercing eyes of the cats. The rain speaks with the seals, telling them elaborate lies about the world and its wonders before the magnificent plunge.

Bright- impossibly bright- colors flitted and swooped above and around me, screeching with voices I'd never before heard, languages even more foreign than that of my absent feline companion. I stood for some time, transfixed and awed. They appeared, eventually, to understand that I meant no harm, and one by one they returned to their respective roosts and nests and resumed the awkward sleep of flying things.

Twice I attempted to change an event, to alter a life in a way not yet presented to me in dream, but I've no head for literature and in any case the scenario played itself out for me just as I'd created it and in countless other ways, besides. They became my children, my pets, these people and stories I knew intimately and would never encounter in any traditional way.

To escape the deluge
I confer with the
bats, and then the
koalas, each telling
me lies I know to be
true. They expect to
be fed and I oblige,
though we all bear
knowledge of their
soundless treachery.

The din of plotting
beasts increases and
I'm certain the
guards can hear, are
in on the conspiracy
so I dare not let them
from my sight as they
float unseeing
through the ether.
The rain has ceased
as much as it is able
to, still apologizing to
the ground and the
beasts as it pours and
floods.

One in particular, of a
brilliant gold-red, settled to my
left atop a wooden perch
beneath which sat a pile of what I
took to be softly glowing ash.
Another caused me to rub my
eyes in disbelief: its color was
the emerald green of the Macaw,
but magnified to such an extent
that it appeared iridescent and
aflame and as it returned to its
post it concealed a pile of
something with a familiar
shimmer and glint.

I wept and laughed
with them, reveled in their
successes and lamented their
misfortunes, enjoying the
simple poignance of ordinary
people who never think to
step beyond the bounds of
what they've always known.
And each moment of elation,
each grievance and
rectification and long-
standing grudge, each
wound, each birth, each
scraped knee and tugged
braid and lost doll and first
kiss and dying breath I felt
and lived to its fullest extent.

It carries the
message from pen
to pen and throat to
throat, preceding
me, besting me, but
I'm too far gone
now and the
whispers are no
longer inaudible or
even whispers
anymore and I seek
in vain a friendly
face.

Monkeys,
teeth
chattering in
the warmth,
give me a
moment's
helpful pause
before I
understand
the joke and
move on.

Exhaustion overtook me then,
and I scarcely had time to find a corner in
which to huddle before sleep claimed me.
As I slipped out of consciousness my
overtired brain told me, sharply and as
though in reprimand, that one does not
typically fall asleep in dreams. I giggled
softly, certain now of the unreality of it
all, and careened off the edge into sleep.

A foot, wedged deftly into ribs,
woke me.

Would that I
could convey the
intensity of such a thing!
I can, however, only hint
at it, in the feeble way of
words, and hope that
you understand. To feel
each moment more fully
than did the individual,

to have yourself so open and vulnerable and yet be so
completely in control and at their mercy, to literally see
the whole of time from beginning to end in the span of a
few hundred years of nights- god! That is what my
fevered, over-taxed mind began to believe I was.

The guards have seen
me now, and I believe it
is purposeful
nonchalance- I know the
truth.

I crouch behind the
fanned-out tail of a
peacock, resplendent
in vivid greys,
matching the
surroundings
impeccably and not
at all. He likes this
not a bit and alerts
his harem who tear
me to ribbons. I
watch them retreat
with beaks bloodied
and bellies full and
wonder idly the
source of the flesh on
which they'd dined.

I felt as though I'd barely
slept and had done so on an
unforgiving stone floor. Another
boot in the side and I was
completely awake. The boot's
owner ceased to acknowledge my
existence the moment our eyes
met, and he carried on with his
work. The birds followed him
lovingly as he fed them and gave a
cursory cleaning of each cage,
returning their calls not in
mockery but in conversation.

Now I really do sound mad. Every holy man does. Whether or not I am such a man is patently irrelevant, insofar as my life and work are concerned. I have been consumed by it, am master and slave, and wouldn't have it any other way. You who read my words, I hope you understand.

The ancient baboon stoically observes my approach, mouthing complaints filled with teeth and blood and years and I bow, softly, so as not to injure or awaken him.

Conspiracy rumbles have stopped, I notice, save for the screeches of exotic plants. Flamingos stand as sentries; no more planning is needed now, and everyone waits expectantly as I maneuver the labyrinthine pathways to the zoo's heart and master.

Once this was finished he collected his supplies, piled them on a cart and moved toward the door through which I'd entered. I remained seated, observing, until an annoyed huff told me I was meant to follow.

The door, however, led not back out into the street but further into the zoo. For the sake of sanity I convinced myself I'd been disoriented and it was, in fact, a different door. In any case, I made his rounds with him, helping where I could to deliver meals to animals as familiar both from life as from legend.

Years passed and the building in which I'd dwelt began to crumble; precious time was lost in transporting my collection to the basement. Several times throughout my project I contemplated organizing my cancerous library, growing daily and becoming altogether willful and unruly. This, however, required time I felt I did not have, so the mess was allowed to accumulate unchecked.

The moon glowers
down impatiently,
arguing with the still-
falling rain and I
crouch upon the
cement to await the
fruition of these
nocturnal conspiracies.

Impossible creatures slept and paced and purred with satisfaction as they ate. The man stroked each one lovingly before closing the cage (but never locking them, I noticed, with a twinge of panic). We passed through segments of the zoo that were clearly out of doors while maintaining an inexplicable feeling of being enclosed as though by permeable glass.

I inquired after a number of the enclosures and their inhabitants as we walked, but received no more than the occasional acknowledgement of my having spoken or, indeed, being present at all. It occurred to me that the man did not speak my language, but even then is it not customary in all corners of the world to at least convey this most basic sentiment? Perhaps not. Eventually I gave up, and this seemed to please my host.

My eyes dimmed and I realized one evening that I didn't need to light a candle; it had been weeks since I'd seen anything at all. This, oddly enough, made me smile, and I paused in my work to listen to the hurried clips of homeward-bound feet outside. At one point I began to transcribe upon the walls, and wondered idly if my mental image of myself and my dwelling remotely resembled reality. A moment's reflection told me it mattered not and in any case I fancied myself capable of seeing more clearly now than I ever had while sighted because, and this fascinated me, I dreamed constantly now, my practiced hand skillfully keeping pace with the incessant flow of image and emotion and melding into one fluid, efficient stream. But as with all things in this life, one becomes accustomed, and with the novelty so went the fascination. Eventually, I could no longer clearly recall a time in which it hadn't been so.

My cage is
warm and
comfortable;
my bed of
grass is
moist with
blood. The
beasts have
been kind.
They watch
in silence as
I drift off to
sleep.

Once all of the creatures had been attended to he replaced the cart in a small closet and I began to fear that I'd be left to my own devices. A kind of dread seeped in through neglected corners of my mind. He seemed to sense it, for after closing the closet door he turned to me and smiled- I assumed it was a smile, although in actuality it was a hideous cracking and twisting of the features into a form with which they were clearly unaccustomed.

I had thus been totally and completely forgotten by the world. Perhaps abandoned is a more fitting term, though in truth it was I who had abandoned them. I had stepped beyond them and into a realm of omniscience, and comparing myself to some sort of deity moved from habit to deeply held belief. I came to think that my stories were in fact written by me, not merely transcribed, and would not exist without me. Lacking a method by which to disprove this, let alone the desire to do so, I remained content in my delusions.

Incredibly, and to my almost fanatical relief, he bade me follow him with a wave of his hand and we moved through another door, the existence of which I hadn't noticed until he was already past the threshold. It failed to occupy any clearly definable space, a wall whose atoms were sufficiently loose so as to allow the passage of a more substantial entity. I shrugged lightly, resigned to the fact that this might not be a dream but it may as well be, and that was simply the way things were.

The soft chattering of happy animals was suddenly and completely replaced, not by voices but by the comforting clatter of a large group of people preparing for a holiday. Plates and glassed tinkled, doors shut and opened and shut, wooden furniture was dragged heavily across tile.... A host of people, whom I could not yet see, were busily absorbed in some joint pursuit.

My initial assertion may seem somewhat, if not wholly, absurd at this point; clearly I dreamed more fully and completely than anyone else in the whole of existence. But, I say to you again: I do not dream. For now, after the passage of more time than it is advisable for man to conceive, I have dreamt every dream, lived every reality, experienced fully every passion and pleasure and dread that it is given to man to know and have finally reached their inevitable termination. Nothing whatsoever remains; and so, the abyss.

I clumsily collected the bags that were thrust into my hands and followed my guide onto what appeared to be a subway station platform. Steep staircases swept up into the void- dozens? Hundreds? - crowded and choked with teeming masses carrying parcels of food and other, less identifiable objects. I stood, dumbstruck on the edge of the platform, the chasm of what I assumed must be train tracks gaping behind me. A banquet table appeared before me, and more food than I had ever seen in one place began to fill it; the crimson table cloth vanished from sight. The packages I carried were taken from me at some point but I failed to notice; I was too transfixed by the bustling hive into which I'd fallen.

Preparation continued and it was brought once more to my attention that no one spoke; what communication did take place was strictly nonverbal, and even that appeared minimal. Whether there was a hive-mind at work here or these people had mastered telepathy, I could not tell.

I gaze into it nightly and it gazes into me and it is the sum total of the absence of all. Eternity itself exists within these walls; I know that now, and without doubt, and the thought fills me with hopeless dread and loathing. Not only once, but countless times has it occurred to me to set my creation ablaze; to drown it, and myself as well, in flame and bring about the only logical conclusion to a body of work such as mine.

Eventually, I was motioned to the massive table. Hundreds of seats filled instantly as though producing their occupants from within themselves. As with the throwing of a switch, the buzz of activity ceased when the last person- myself- was seated. The heads that had been trained on my movements swiftly joined their fellows as each and every person present turned to stare into the eyes of the one across from them. This continued far too long for comfort, but I tried to follow suit. The idea of telepathy presented itself again, and if that were the case this ritual seemed to be some sort of prayer.

Whatever it was, prayer or hollow ritual, ended abruptly as everyone refocused their attention to the food before them. Again I wondered if they were a hive mind, parts of a whole, their consciousnesses fused at some crucial point that allowed their activities to be carried out in unbroken unity. They grasped at the food like children then, without regard for the civility to which I was accustomed, but there was an innocent appeal to it and I joined them.

This, of course, is not within my power. It is not given to the creator to destroy; this belongs alone to another, about whom I'd learned in my aeons of agony. Still I am in agony, but of a very different breed and its flavor fills my mouth and drenches my soul. It is an agony to which I alone am privy, and of which I alone am in complete control: and man adores that torment of which he knows himself the master.

Within minutes bones and plates were clean and gleaming, and the casual observer would have been hard-pressed to claim that they had ever been otherwise. The empty dishes were removed by a few of the younger ones, and their elders rearranged themselves to face one another in two somber, unbroken lines. I remained seated and found myself at the center of the assembly. I tried to rise, suddenly as uncomfortable as before and unable to avoid the impression that what was about to take place was unspeakably important and not for my eyes, but my guide stilled me with a hand on my shoulder. I tried not to fidget.

Those who had removed the settings returned, bearing quills and parchment, which they placed in piles around the table. Retreating again into the shadows, they watched. The air of formality, especially in contrast to the lightheartedness of the meal, was becoming oppressive.

With obscure ceremony the supplies were passed to each participant and another moment of 'prayer' took place, a dozen sets of eyes staring, wide and unblinking. A dozen hands lightly gripped the quills (except for mine, which I held with tight anxiety) and then,

with one motion, the heads bowed to the parchment, touched quill tip to ink and began to draw. An overwhelming compulsion to follow suit overtook me and my quill began to draw as well, unwilling to await my consent. My hand scribbling frantically, I kept my gaze on my companions; each seemed to have utterly forgotten the existence of the others, of the room or, indeed, of themselves. It was like watching a clairvoyant transcribing the thoughts of the dead. Fresh sheets of parchment were provided by the onlookers, as well as filled inkwells as the minutes? hours? passed. I lost all conception of time and place, never glancing down at my composition. I may well have slept, or gone into a trance similar to the ones I observed; I wish I knew.

Abruptly I awoke from my stupor as the scratching of the quills stilled. Palms were laid flat on the table and eyes were raised, the old men suddenly seeming wholly disinterested in what they had been doing. I, on the other hand, found myself thoroughly fascinated. On each sheet ink fanned out from various points, lines and curves joining and intersecting, deliberate and meaningful; labyrinths, spirals, intricate patterns played across the pages. As far as I could tell, no two were exactly the same. My eyes wandered across the designs, and the thought struck me that they were a language of sorts; the written form of the language these people had ceased to use in any other way. It seemed absurd at first, but I could not shake the feeling. There was something far too logical in the positioning of the angles and curves, the repetition of certain patterns, and as I 'read' I became aware of images forming in my mind. Epic battles and beasts without names, heroes and villains and breathtaking vistas, none of which I'd seen anywhere before. Of course, the themes were familiar, but the specifics.... There were no names, but the feelings of places I'd visited- Greece and Germany, Russia and America, the unconscious impressions these places leave behind, their people and leaders and significant moments in history-

even a pointedly forgotten moment from my own life. The compositions of some of the older members seemed to detail the creation of this very city; its rise from the ashes, its great events and the accomplishments of its people, the subsequent decline as large groups left for faraway lands and created newer, bigger lives for themselves and their offspring. Vivid, sweeping scenes, overwhelming sensations of home and history and time, so much time.... And just before the pages were removed, connections were clarified between the images and I stifled a cry.

This is their history, I realized, but more than that, it's the history of Everything. This strange, awkward little place, with its voiceless people, this is where it all began. These swirling patterns were stories, passed down through time, carried in the joint consciousness and written down by the elders. But, why had I been invited to participate? I looked around the table and my thoughts whirled. *To add my stories to the collective. Because I'm already a part of this.* Obviously they had not written the things I had recognized personally, or so, for the sake of rational thought, I chose to believe; I had lost track of which of the pages were mine, and if the goal is a record of *everything*, then input from strangers would be welcome. It was here that, despite my best efforts, my train of thought derailed and rumbled on, trackless and with wild abandon: the stories were written by the elders and strangers because they could only be recorded by *those who had been there to witness them.*

This, of course, was patently absurd. Many of the vague shadows that lingered stubbornly after the pages were removed seemed ancient beyond belief except, of course, those I must have written. I longed to examine the manuscripts further, to fill my head with the brilliant colors of battle and revenge, of gods and creatures and ancient, heroic men. It occurred to me that written accounts of any kind tend to lose something in their translation; colors, for example, or the moments leading up to death. These things can be

described but never properly experienced by the reader. Somehow, this pictographic style of writing overcame such obstacles, the impotence and insufficiency of the written word, and provided the reader with *exactly* what happened, down to the smallest sensory input. For all intents and purposes, after having read about them, *I had participated in the events.*

And it seemed, given my ability to access the information contained therein and, indeed, to add to it, that no language gap existed. I could see and understand what was written despite the absence of cognizant translation. Thus nothing was lost except the subtle and often crippling difference between one lexicon and another. It was a universal language.

The language of the gods.

This last struck me with such force that I nearly lost consciousness. To give it such a title was to accept not only the existence of a deity, but also that these people either *were* that creature or at very least its terrestrial liaison. In either case, why had they needed me? Wouldn't they have access to all of creation, past and future, without the input of a lesser being?

These thoughts occupied me for some time, threatening to annihilate my sanity, before I was instructed to rise and follow a young woman. Exhaustion gripped my limbs and brain, clutching my ankles and dragging along like a child in tantrum. I felt utterly drained and the poor girl practically carried me up the half-dozen flights of stairs and through the series of corridors that led to my lodgings. I thanked her, the word coming out in less than a whisper as I sank onto my bed. I only dimly registered the flush that stained her face at the sound of my voice, as though at some lewd suggestion, and she hurried out of the room. I made it only partially onto the naked mattress before tumbling into midnight oblivion.

When I awoke, much of the intensity of my revelations had subsided. As I scanned the sparsely furnished room, it occurred to

me that there may have been something hallucinogenic in the food; it's hardly uncommon for holy rituals to be 'guided' in a more spiritual direction. I didn't feel as though I'd been drugged but it seemed so obvious now, and explained so much of the evening... My heart sank. I wanted so desperately for it to have *meant* something.....

Eventually, I was interrupted by the girl from the night before, who carried a set of clothes and a bar of soap. She left them in the doorway and closed the door again. I washed and dressed hurriedly, and when I stepped out into the hallway she was sitting on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her like a child. We exchanged smiles as I helped her to her feet, and she led me back through the building toward the subway platform. I marveled at the size of the place; up and down and around and never once did we step outside. Our path began to loop back on itself as we walked, crossing through the same doorless room once, twice, three times; passing the same little boy's shoe again and again from different directions and through doors that hadn't been there before. It felt like an Escher painting, but each step filled me with the joyful conviction that *I had been right*, there were no drugs, no trips, and in a place like this it was perfectly logical that in order to navigate one must know both *where* and *when* to go.

My slender guide moved confidently. She'd grown up here, this was her home and she knew its tricks and turns better than I knew my own hometown. At one point I noted the contents of a room to my left- children's toys and clothes strewn about, the fallout of play. There was only one door, the one through which I peered, but when we encountered it again from a different direction we walked through the wreckage and beneath an arch out onto the platform. No staircases this time, and I understood that the place was alive somehow, constantly shifting, dancing, never stagnant but entirely predictable if you knew the steps. If you spoke the language.

Keen as I was to explore, the crowd that met us on the platform told me wordlessly that it was time for me to leave. They handed me a bag filled with bread and cheese and water and led me through another door and down a lightless stairwell. More corridors, some lit with a strange, apparently sourceless light while others were less inviting, and gradually the group began to thin until I realized, upon ascending a small flight of stairs into a suffocating space that I was alone. For how long I couldn't guess; like the cat they'd simply vanished, and the soft padding of shoeless feet was revealed to be echoes of my own hesitant steps.

The fear that should have been there wasn't. There were several doors to choose from, and as I passed through one and into another hallway I suddenly and completely understood.

My mind cleared and I began to read the path, the twists and turns of the labyrinth telling their story as I moved through cramped and gaping spaces that were only there when they were supposed to be until I stepped beyond the borders of the town and was bathed in daylight. Glancing back I smiled at the absence of any visible doorway. I sat and ate, reveling in the breeze that flowed across the sea and up the cliffs behind me.

I speak the language now, I thought happily as I drifted into a light sleep. My dreams were filled with corridors and chambers that told all manner of stories, some much more familiar than they had seemed before. These inanimate structures of stone and plaster spoke volumes, constructed as they were to tell the stories of the people who inhabited them and of those who never would. It was an eternal language, found in every corner of the world, every religion, and all throughout nature, and yet....

When I awoke these dreams became a decision I felt had been made for me. I stood, stretched, and with a deep sense of peace and purpose crawled on hands and knees into a tiny chink in the rock, back into the labyrinth.

Waiting

I watched the ceremony today.
Poor girl, and so pretty. Not anymore though, I suppose. Hard to be pretty when what skin you have let is swollen and blue. The more I think about it the more it bothers me. Why her? I know why, of course, we all do, but the knowledge doesn't help much. Nice ceremony. A bit longer than usual, but nice. And she'll be back. She always comes back sooner or later. I look forward to her return, as always. She's sweet. I hope she got that stuffed animal I left for her.

The fog creeps up, liquid, satin-smooth, to lick the rear wall of my house, the wall never once penetrated by door or window or encroached upon by human feet.

I'm glad there are no windows there; the scene, I imagine, would be far too hideous even for me. But I feel the fog and know its name and call it thus, hoping to drive it and its inhabitants home and away. I hate living here.

The edge of town is such a dreary place to dwell, set apart from fellows and so fiercely, unendurably

Who is Witherspoon Fisch?

Wouldn't you like to know.

We all would, in fact. Hell, that may not even be his real name, though that's what's scrawled across the birth certificate dug from between the leaves of an old, old copy of an untitled book hiding on a long forgotten shelf. It had been there so long the glue from the binding had melted and melded the lone sheet into itself, claiming it as its own.

So we assume that's his name; the Book wouldn't lie.

I hope she liked
it.

I hope she comes
back. This always
worries me,
though I don't
know why; I
know she'll be
back, in a few
months or years
or longer but she
will. And she
may look
different, and
speak oddly and
be older or
younger or
exactly, in every
way the same but
she'll be back and
they won't
acknowledge her
because they
know what would
happen if they
did. I wonder
who it's for.
The ceremony,
that is.

I wonder if they
know.

isolated.

Though I
suppose it's not
so much the
edge of town as
it once was, at
least not from
the perspective
of down below.
The town, still
small, still
forgotten, grew
up around me
and I watch
them as I have
for so very long,
watched them
from here, from
this upper edge
of their
existence.

Joining them
only when I
know the devils
to be distracted
for a time and of
no immediate
threat. I am the
ever vigilant
watchman and
have been for
forever and will
continue thusly.

**So who is
Witherspoon
Fisch?**

**He lives alone
in a one room
shack at the top
of the hill on
the edge of the
cliff overlooking
the town
haphazardly
clustered
around him. He
is at the center
of activity and
discourse, such
as it is, and he
likes it that
way; or so he
would probably
tell you if he
ever came down
off his
mountain.**

**He is the village
deity and his
anger brings
upon our heads
the contents of
the chamber
pot he
stubbornly
continues to
use.**

I wonder where
this book came
from. I wonder if
she's still in pain.
I'm glad she'll
forget. I really
hope she forgets.
Maybe sometime
they'll forget.
But they won't,
not as long as I'm
here and she
returns. It will be
a while before
she's here again,
though I'm not
sure why or how I
know that.

Though,
truthfully, how
long is forever?
Surely it is not
always as in
ante-time, and
continuing on
after its
cessation. But it
is all I know and
all I recall and
therefore it is
easier and more
expedient to say
forever.

My writing is
small and
crabbed as I pen
these words in
the empty
leather-bound
book I found
once, tucked in
amid all the
volumes
choking the
shelves that I
can recite
verbatim but
cannot recall
actually reading,
though I must
have, I suppose.

**He won't let
anyone near
enough to
install water or
electricity, says
his well was
dug and water
raised without
cheating, same
as the candles
and oil lamps
that shine eerily
through the
windows at
night.**

**Or so we think
he'd say and
feel if on his
annual trek into
town he spoke
to anyone.**

**He buys queer
things from the
shop when he
comes, things
with which
other things are
made; holy
things,
necessary
things, secret
and evil and
wondrous
things.**

I know not from
whence it came
but the binding
is strangely soft
and the pages
oddly crisp and
they drink in the
ink from my
feather pen with
increasing
rapidity.

Sometimes it is
all I can do to
keep up with
these nonsense
words spilling
forth from my
fingers, often
bypassing my
brain
completely as
though
stemming from
the book itself.
Always when I
lift my quill to
write and loosen
the lid of the
not-quite-black
ink I turn to the
first page and
find it virgin off-
white.

**Or so he would
claim were he
ever to attempt
an explanation
himself when he
murmurs his
wants to the
shopkeeper.
The
shopkeeper,
though, he
knows the list
and has the
items
assembled
neatly on the
counter when
Witherspoon
Fisch arrives.
Has it ready, in
fact, as soon as
Witherspoon
Fisch begins his
journey into
town and the
shopkeeper,
bless him,
smiles and
nods, waiting
patiently as
Witherspoon
Fisch slowly
recites his list
as though for
the very first
time.**

I've stopped
questioning this
oddity. It
sharpens the
constant ache in
my head to a
startling degree
as if the mystery
were not mine
to solve.
Perhaps it is not.

I opened the
book today and
found it full. Not
a bare margin or
empty corner,
no space at all
on which to
scribble and it
was then that I
realized I'd
removed my
quill from its
box and
loosened the cap
of the not-quite-
black ink and
opened the book
out of habit and
not because
there was
anything left to
be said.

**And the
shopkeeper
nods to each
thing in turn,
then bags them
up for
Witherspoon
Fisch and takes
his money and
bids him good
day and
watches him
shuffle slowly
away.**

**So who is
Witherspoon
Fisch?**

**Everyone has a
theory, as
everyone is
wont to do.**

**I have one, too,
but it's
probably wrong,
or so would say
Witherspoon
Fisch if he ever
spent time in
the empty pub
and overheard
the whispered
talk.**

I found an
envelope on the
ground; I don't
know where it
came from. I
don't think I've
ever sent a letter
before.

The urge to pen
this explanation
on that envelop
and stick it snug
between the
pages was more
than I could
resist, so here
they are, the last
words I will ever
write; I have
solved the
mystery and
unraveled the
puzzle and the
answer lies
between the
flaps of leather
that bind it
together (as
does every
answer and
every answer
besides) for
herein
li(v)es forever.

**He did come in,
once, and
nobody noticed
until a few had
been aired and
a few more
besides and he
turned to us
silently from
behind his beer
and his sack of
goodies.**

**Without making
eye contact he
said in an
almost half-
whisper,
“You’re
probably
wrong,” and
then he stood
and he left with
the glass in his
hand and no
one said a word
because it’s
Witherspoon
Fisch and it’s
probably his
glass anyway;
or so he might
say, I suppose,
had anyone
mentioned it.**

**No one did,
though. No one
but the kid the
bartender was
training. He
hollered and
yelled that
they'd seen no
money for the
tab that had
been rung up by
Witherspoon
Fisch over the
years, that it
was high time
he paid up and
hey,
goddammit,
that's one of
the new
glasses, just
come in the
shipment
today....**

**Back up the
mountain went
Witherspoon
Fisch without a
care or a word
and he hummed
a tune we'd
never heard**

**before except
on windy nights
that brought
the music down
the slope to
curious ears.**

**And that, dear
reader, is
Witherspoon
Fisch.**

**“But who?” you
may cry in
frustration,
“you’ve said
nothing!”**

**I’ll tell you the
truth if you
listen and hear;
perhaps next
year, when I
come down the
mountain.**

**And I’ll smile, a
little.**

**Or would, I
suppose, if I’d
told you this
much of the
story.**

Přijdeš?

“Are you ok?” Rose stood in the doorway, one hand clutching her arm, eye patch carefully hidden as always. Sophia had been sitting on the lumpy cot in her room, staring blankly at the floor.

She glanced up. “The medication makes my head a little fuzzy, ya know?”

Rose nodded. “I hate it,” she said, and sat down beside Sophia. “Do you know what it’s for?”

“Sleep, I guess,” Sophia shrugged, and moved to collect the book Rose had stolen from Anton. It was deep inside the mattress, and she had to feel around a bit before she found it. Her pale hands caressed the cover and binding and she sighed in relief. Her eyes closed and she breathed deeply, still touching the book, with Rose’s curious eyes following her every move.

Sophia remembered herself with a start and shook her head sheepishly. She motioned for her friend to move closer and situated the book between them. Shoulders hunched over pages that threatened idly to crumble as they were turned, slowly and deliberately; sometimes two pages together, sometimes whole sections, sometimes toward the back, other times the front. At one point, when Sophia paused for a moment, Rose ran one finger lovingly down the right-hand page, mouthing words here and there, forming without much effort the difficult sounds of the long-forgotten language. Both girls appeared to be visiting an old friend as they read, drinking in the intricate phrases and liquid phonology that existed nowhere else on earth.

They were in search of something specific. Or rather, Sophia was.

“How do you do it?” Rose asked quietly.

“Hm?”

“You’re looking for something,” she continued, “but how? The pages never stay in the same place, and once you pass one

you'll probably never see it again. At least, I've never seen the same page twice."

Sophia looked up at her and smiled. "I'm not really... Looking," she said uncertainly. She wondered why an explanation was necessary; it seemed so obvious. "Hang on," she kept turning the pages, "let me find one so I can explain."

"One, what?"

"Just hang on.... Ah, ok, here we go." Before them was an image- a beautiful, twisting pattern, lines and curves crossing, intersecting, running parallel, forming something that resembled the floor plan of a labyrinth. It covered both pages, reaching from the middle out to the edges of its paper prison. The nature of its construction created a sort of optical illusion, so that the lines appeared to move gently.

"Have you seen one of these before?" Rose shook her head. "It's a language; a very old and special language. Older than any of the others in the book. Actually, people stopped using it long before these others even existed."

Rose considered this. "So... it's kind of like the grandfather language of Japanese? I mean, there are no words, exactly. Just symbols."

Sophia hesitated. "Sort of, I guess. But the characters in Japanese stand for specific words or sounds. This is more" she gestured to the pattern, "almost more like a movie. It's fluid, and this combination of lines," she pointed, "doesn't mean the same as this, even though they look identical."

"Because of the lines around it?"

"Uh, sort of. But look, can't you read it? Or see it, I guess. Just look. Do you see pictures in your head?" Rose concentrated on the page for a moment. A smile spread across her face and she nodded emphatically.

“But how does it work? I don’t know what it says, I just sort of understand...”

Sophia shrugged. “That I don’t know. That’s just how it works. If you know there’s something to understand, you just can. If you see a pretty picture, then that’s all it is. Ancient people knew there was power in patterns like this, that’s why they built mazes and things for religious ceremonies. They were pathways to gods, or enlightenment. Only the priests knew why the mazes were built the way they were, with the specific dead ends and spirals and stuff. It wasn’t so much a path to god, as it was a description of him, and by following it you gained understanding of him. Or it. Or whatever. Get it?”

Rose nodded, still transfixed. “And this is the language where they got the... *phrases*?... for the mazes, right? And you can speak it?”

“Sort of,” Sophia shrugged. “I used to know what it was supposed to sound like, and when I see the pictures I can almost remember. I’m really out of practice though,” she smiled.

They were silent for a moment, until Rose frowned. “But wait, that still doesn’t explain-”

Sophia cut her off. “Oh, that. Well you know that the pages move, but it’s not random. You just have to know how to follow the path they make, how the one connects with the other and then you just follow it, like a map or... Erm...” Her face scrunched in frustration. “The pages don’t exactly move, only there are so many of them that they can’t all be visible at once, you know? They don’t move, or disappear, it’s just that you can’t open the book to where they exist every time. Or more than once, usually, unless you had all the time and patience in the world... or knew what you were doing.” She smiled conspiratorially. “The language lets you navigate the book. You can sort of read the shape of it. I wasn’t flipping pages at random, more like following

a path that curves and loops back on itself, that seems to go in circles but really, if you follow it right, will lead you somewhere new or, in this case, somewhere you've seen before."

Rose just stared, and Sophia shrugged. "I don't know how else to explain it, sorry."

"No, it's ok. It makes sense, sort of. Just can't quite wrap my mind around it."

"You'll get it." Silence resumed and the two girls sat admiring their old friend, slowly turning pages.

A sharp intake of breath, and Sophia slammed her finger down on the page. "This is it," she whispered, eyes tracing another labyrinth. "You see? I told you, didn't I?"

"We should show Anton," Rose said after a while.

Sophia recoiled. "This is the beginning-" she gestured to the numeral at the top of the page- "this was not meant to be found. Ever. Even if you know how. But this" she tapped the center of the page, "this is how we get out."

"That's why we should tell him. He's in this too, you know."

"I know. It doesn't matter though, because once it's done..." She gestured absently.

Rose nodded, unconvinced. "So what now?" she asked, more than a little melancholy in her voice. A tangible silence draped over them and she looked expectantly over at Sophia, whose eyes had acquired an unsettling cast. She shrugged slowly, deliberately, and with a weight that brought the silence in the room to unbearable extremes. One finger traced the lines again, dancing and colliding and prying themselves apart again on the yellowed paper. It stopped at one point, dead center between the two pages, disappearing into the binding.

"This is what we need. The Name. The only part of this whole pattern that stays the same."

“Stays the same?”

“The rest of it can move. You don’t really notice because when you’re looking at it you’re watching the images it conjures up. But the lines do move, except for this little bit right here.” She began pulling frantically at the binding, trying to pry it apart and free the pages.

“What are you doing?!” Rose shrieked, clutching at the book, terrified.

Something like a growl escaped Sophia’s throat as the book left her hands. Pressing it to her chest, Rose backed toward the door, shaking her head. Her eye patch fluttered in and out of view and as she shut the door she said, noting somewhere deep down the comedy of her words, “You’re nuts, you know that?” The door shut with a click.

Breathing heavily and vibrating with rage, Sophia lunged out of the room and down the hall, throwing wide the door to Anton’s room. As calmly as she could with all that fire and brimstone in her veins, she said, “Anton, I need that back. Now.”

His eyes darted in confusion from her to a second man whom Sophia had failed to notice. The stranger began to laugh. “What is it you need, my dear?” he winked.

She stared at him while addressing Anton. “Rose stole a book from you. I need it.”

The confusion in his eyes waxed and then waned again rapidly. He smiled, sharing a look with the stranger, who produced the book from inside his coat. Sophia’s eyes widened and she reached for it as he lifted it over his head. “Indian giver,” he said with a chuckle.

“I need it!” she shrieked, “You have no idea what it is, but it’s important and *I fucking need it!*”

The stranger looked incredulous. “I don’t, do I? Well maybe that’s best. I think I’ll hang on to it for a while, if it’s all the same. It’s too

soon for you to have it. Better for me, an ignorant slob, to take care of it for a while, don't you think?" He smiled.

Sophia wondered briefly if anyone had ever literally exploded from too much unexpendable emotion. Apparently not, and she was not pleased about it. The stranger turned and left, leaving Sophia to stare furiously at Anton.

"He'll take good care of it," he said soothingly, "and he'll bring it back. When it's time."

"But it is time," she whispered, tears welling up. "It's been time for a while now. I'm tired. I want it to be time, and it's up to me."

He smiled sadly, patting the spot next to him on the cot. "Come here." She sat beside him and he pulled out a book. "Have you read this one before? It's a little young for you, but you might like it." He put his arm around her and she leaned against him, still shaking, as he chose a story towards the middle. "*The Little Squeegy Bug*," he announced. She sighed in resignation, and allowed herself to relax into a tale that was not wholly unfamiliar.

**Forgotten
&
Familiar**

He woke up suddenly, completely, and with a gasp as the horribly vivid dream went racing into the shadowed recesses of his mind....

Son of a bitch.

Felix glowered at the familiar ceiling as it cleverly disguised the hole through which he'd fallen. *Again.* His head hurt less this time, or at least he was more prepared for it as he glanced around, confirming his suspicions. Same room, same empty walls, same puddle of viscous ooze leading to the same tender wound. He sighed in exasperation and sat up slowly, sliding back to lean against the wall.

What now?

The oscillating vertigo made it difficult to think clearly, but something tickled his mind each time it strayed toward the child. Patting his pockets gingerly he found the little shoe, still tucked safely away. He stroked the laces absently as the throbbing in his head subsided.

I hope the kid's ok.

He tried to feel the words, really mean them, but they made him chuckle and laughter brought with it fresh waves of pain. He tried, too, to be afraid, but all he could muster was vague irritation as he rubbed his eyes, itchy with dry and flaking tears. The residue of fear lingered, a skuzzy film left over after the wave broke. He tried to collect it, to use it to motivate him, but he was stubbornly, frustratingly calm and there was nothing to be done about it. Felix sighed.

There were no growls now, no pinball grumbles to prick at his nerves. No tiny mismatched footfalls either. "I'm alone now," he said.

"No, you're not."

Felix froze. He held his breath and listened, which made his head ache all over again. “Hello?” It came out as a croak so he cleared his throat and tried again.

“Hi.” The voice was female, and husky with tears. “How’s it goin’?”

“Not great,” he almost laughed, “you?”

“Same.” She sighed.

“Do you know where we are?”

“Yeah.”

Felix paused, irritation hedging in on the shock. “Care to enlighten me?” Silence. He looked behind him at the wall, as though that would help. She was just there, on the other side. He was sure of it. “Hang on, I’ll find you.”

She chuckled ruefully as he stood, said something he didn’t quite catch. He hurried out the door and down the hall, and then back up again. Each room he found was empty, and he began to question his spatial reasoning. “*No you won’t.*” *That’s what she had said. And she’s right,* he thought mournfully, *because this place makes no goddamn sense.* “He-hello?”

Silence.

Fuck.

His pace slowed. *I can’t even remember which room I was in. They all look the same. And the blood is gone, which means-* he stroked his wound- *yup, that’s gone too. Neat.* He rolled his eyes and leaned heavily on a wall that decided it didn’t feel like being a wall at that particular moment. Stumbling back with a cry he found himself outside.

Outside.

Wild eyed and gaping he stared around him, unaware of the light drizzle and awkward glances collecting on his person. He plopped heavily onto the slick cobblestones. The wall had decided it preferred life as a door, which then swung open and

hiding.”

connected squarely with his back, sending him sprawling once more.

This is getting old, he thought, as an impressively colorful woman shrieked and ordered her package-laden husband to help the poor man on the ground.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Felix stood and brushed non-existent dust from his clothes. He massaged his head and wondered how poorly the obvious question would be received.

“You’re American?!” screeched the woman, waddling over like a paint drenched penguin.

Fuuuuckk... “Yes?”

“*Oh*, I thought you were *homeless*! What were you *doing* crouching in front of a *door* that way? My goodness, that *was* poor planning on your part, now *wasn’t* it?”

“I, uh, ‘spose so,” Felix conceded as she brushed at him vigorously.

“You’re fine,” she decided, and motioned for her pack mule to follow. “*Make better decisions*,” she sang as they disappeared down the narrow road, her husband grunting and struggling behind her.

Felix stared after them, his thoughts a frolicking jumble that fled, startled, as the door swung open again and a round little face poked out.

“Přijdeš do?”

“Uhh...”

“Are you coming in?” He grinned.

You can’t just leave her there.

Felix smiled back and followed him through the battered wooden door that hadn’t been there a handful of minutes before. They wandered through what turned out to be an art gallery as the man chattered, business casual, in his soothing, mercurial

accent. He said his name was Zdenek. "How long have you been in Prague?" he asked.

"5 minutes, give or take," Felix replied, expecting a laugh, receiving a hearty welcome and a beer instead.

"We are—" Zdenek struggled for the word, "celebrate! You will join us."

"What are we celebrating?"

They struggled to explain, something about a contest, and a terrible painting being sold. Beyond that was lost, but they fed him well and kept his pint glass full. His four hosts told stories, mostly in English but peppered with Czech phrases they claimed couldn't be translated. Zdenek tried to translate some jokes that were told throughout the night, but they came off stale and wooden and he shrugged, insisting they were funny. Felix smiled and nodded and laughed along, completely lost and totally at peace with it.

They gave him a drunken, stumbling tour of the narrow rooms and crooked passageways of the gallery. The spaces felt odd and cobbled together, as ceilings dropped inexplicably and then lifted again, windows peered out onto rooftops or faced off against brick walls, stone gave way to wood which deferred to powdery drywall. Child-sized doors concealed mysterious spaces and a thick metal ring revealed an otherwise invisible opening in the floor with no counterpart on the ceiling below.

As the little party moved awkwardly through they described each piece to their guest as solemnly as their giggles would allow. It was local, contemporary art, some of which Zdenek and the owner, Milan, painted themselves. One piece in particular gave Felix pause, and when he couldn't satisfactorily explain to himself why, he asked Zdenek to tell him about it.

"This is mine!" he said triumphantly, "My favorite, I think." The two girls, whose names Felix forgot as soon as he

heard them, nodded intently and the taller one murmured something to her friend. "Five years," Zdenek continued, "I work on it, but it is never closed—"

"Finished," Milan offered. Zdenek nodded.

"Finished. It is never finished."

"But it's for sale?" Felix asked, "even though it's not finished?"

He shrugged. "No one buys. You are first person to ask." The group regarded the piece. Grey tones, sharp lines, a small splatter of bright crimson drawing the eye right and down. But the lines didn't fit. They resigned themselves to uncomfortable, aborted angles and crouched there, waiting.

"Where is this place?"

Zdenek's eyes narrowed. "Where?" Milan and the girls looked at one another uneasily.

"It looks familiar. Have you been there?"

"Yes," he nodded, hesitated. "You also?" The girls
tittered softly as Felix said that he
had.

You have to go back.

"I think so, anyway. I
think," he chose his words
carefully, "I think I just came from
there."

The Czech gazed at him thoughtfully, muttered to his friends. It sounded to Felix as if they were arguing. "How?"

Felix shrugged. "I honestly have no idea," he said, "I woke up there. I think I fell—" they were nodding gently.

"Where were you before? In America?"

"Yeah, I was in America. In my apartment, I guess, but I'm not sure."

They spoke quietly in Czech again. "You remember nothing other? Where or why or—" Felix shook his head.

“How you get here? Prague?” Milan this time.

“I fell through a wall,” Felix laughed, “it just so happened to be your front door.” Zdenek nodded as though this was perfectly logical. *They didn’t understand.* Felix patted the wall behind him, leaned against it as he had before, pantomimed falling backward.

“I understand,” Zdenek said, “it is often this way. When you do not expect, you find.”

Something clicked in Felix’s head. It was obscure, fleeting, but he clung to it as best he could. “What do you mean?”

She’s waiting.

He struggled to find the words, conferring with the others. After several false starts, the shorter girl whispered in a rhotic drawl, “If you expect to find a thing you will not in this place,” she pointed at the painting. “You will not find. If you do not think or want to find, you will. You must fool it, make it think you do not want.”

Zdenek nodded. “You did not look for way out, yes? When you come here.”

“No, I-”

“That is why you find. Understand?”

Felix thought for a moment. “I think so,” then shook his head. “No. No, I really don’t.”

The short girl grinned. “Suspend understanding,” she said. “Is what my teacher of English says. You know what it means?”

Felix smiled, feeling oddly relieved. “Yeah, that I understand.” Gentle laughter as though he’d made a joke. “Have you been there?” he addressed the women, who shook their heads. He frowned. “There was a girl there, right before I

got here. I heard her voice through the wall and I was looking for her..."

Zdenek smiled, and led Felix back the way they'd come. "I did not know it was so big," he said as they walked, "all the way to America! But then, of course, I do not expect to become in America, so why do I not go there I do not know!" He chuckled.

"What is it? I mean, who built it, and why?"

"I do not know this. Only that it is. Here" Zdenek tugged on the ring in the floor, "this does not go any place. You see?" They peered down into a familiar room. "You can not find her, yes? You know this?" Felix nodded. "Good. You go. We will not meet again," he winked.

Against all common sense and better judgment Felix lowered himself into the hole and dropped lightly to the floor. The door closed with a bang.

Clearing his mind as best he could, Felix began to walk. He expected the floor to give way, the doors to become dead ends, the hallway to narrow to an impossible point. He waited for stairs to appear that led to nothing, he waited to fall.

He almost tripped over her.

"Watch it," she snapped, slender arms curled around her knees. She was shivering visibly despite the trench coat wrapped around her. All pride and smiles Felix sat beside her, trying not to look away for fear of losing her again. "And stop staring at me. It's creepy." He obliged, keeping a finger on a corner of the coat just in case. "You just been wandering around this whole time?" she asked.

"Took a detour through Prague, actually," he laughed.

"Hm." She rested her forehead on her knees and mumbled.

"What?"

Again, louder, "I don't want to go back."

"Go back? To- Prague?"

"To anywhere."

He glanced sideways at her. "Why not?"

"I don't want to die again."

"You- what?"

"You heard me," she growled. They sat in silence a while. Felix watched her heave a sigh, narrow shoulders straining against the heavy cloth.

"You can't just stay here forever," he said finally.

"Why not? Is the world gonna end?" Her head snapped up and she rolled her eyes. "*Yes, of course* it will, and *I don't care!*" Frost white hair spilled over her face as she dropped her head again and began to cry.

Felix was at a loss, so he scooped her up and began to walk. She didn't protest, but continued weeping softly into his shoulder. As he descended a short flight of stairs he whispered, "I'm Felix."

"I know," she moaned, "you always are. And you always find me, you bastard." He paused, taken aback. "Oh, just keep going. Get it over with." She pointed limply to the right, "That way." He obeyed, and as they rounded a corner she whispered, "I'm Sophia."

The light was harsh, clinical, and he stood momentarily blinded. She struggled lightly and he let her feet down as she tugged the coat tighter and padded away.

"Felix...?" Alice stood behind him, her cart momentarily abandoned. "Something wrong?" He stared uncomprehendingly, and gestured vaguely at Sophia's retreating back. Alice caught up to her and gasped, a sound which summoned several orderlies who set about getting the newcomer situated with fresh clothes and a bed. The nurse

busied herself with the paperwork, trying not to notice the vacant room, pointedly ignoring Sophia's resemblance to its former inhabitant. Felix followed her as the pieces of memory fell into place.

"She's gone, isn't she?" he asked.

"Who, Felix?" a note of desperation hung in the question.

"Rose."

Alice bit her lip. "I don't know who you're talking about, Felix," she replied without conviction. "According to our records we've never had anyone named Rose here with us."

She met his gaze and held it a moment. "*Rose was never here,*" she insisted, fighting back frightened tears. He nodded, and turned toward his room. "Felix," she said softly, "I'm glad you came back."

"Me, too." He smiled. "It makes more sense in here."

She watched him go, and realized she wouldn't be coming to work again.

Dr. McKay, as he went to close his office for the day, found a set of nurse's scrubs with a gold-tone name tag heaped carelessly on his desk, along with a short letter of resignation scrawled in a hasty, trembling

hand.

I Met the Creator in a Dive Bar

It had been a very long day indeed, and the only think I could bring myself to do was sit at the bar, elbows sticking sickly to the counter, and drink away the paycheck I hadn't made yet. Wasn't going to make, in fact, as of an hour before.

Or maybe it was three hours. I really don't know how long I sat there, listening to the clinking of glasses being washed because they'd been idle too long. No one ever came to this particular bar on purpose, and I'd always wondered how it managed to stay open but never cared enough to ask. Anyway, the bartender was a burly Eastern European with an ill-fitting handlebar moustache and the only words he knew in English were 'beer,' 'whiskey,' and 'on the rocks.'

I started roughly when the door opened. Perhaps I had been sleeping. The interloper took a seat beside me as I tapped the bar and watched my tab grow. I lit another cigarette and inspected it as the bartender emptied the ashtray.

It wasn't raining, but it should have been. One of those heavy, stifling nights when the chill runs a little too deep and the whole city lies anxiously awaiting release.

I didn't notice him until I nearly ran him down, hidden as he was just beyond the sickly yellow of the streetlight that cast more shadows than it dispelled. Catching myself just before our shoulders hit, I chuckled awkwardly, an awful sound on such a night. "Can I bum one of those?" I asked, trying not to sound as though I needed it the way I did. He took a drag, long and slow and held his palms up, to my eyes an indication that he had no more. I shrugged and started to move on; he slid one hand over the other and produced an already lit cigarette. My surprise did not prevent me from accepting it gratefully. "Where have you been?"

"I'm sorry to bother you," the stranger said softly to the counter, "but I could really use one of those." I slid the back toward him without a word and drained my glass. It filled itself up again as if by magic.

"Thanks," he said, just as quietly, and produced a shiny new lighter from his coat pocket. I couldn't restrain the sidelong glance I gave him then; not only was he one of *those* smokers- the kind who make such a habit of bumming that they carry their own lighters- but it looked like something he'd lifted from somewhere expensive. He certainly didn't *smell* homeless, but he would have fit right in among the brown paper bottles and aluminum fireplaces. I'm not one to judge, though, especially since my drinks were on the house that night. I wasn't looking forward to the house discovering this fact.

He chuckled, long and low and thick with a smoker's bitter rasp, gesturing with the glowing point of red. "Around," he said, and took another drag.

We were silent a moment, enveloped in billows of smoke that hung defiantly in the air.

"I haven't seen you in a while," I tried again, and again the rasping laugh.

"You haven't been looking very hard."

It was true, and I nodded in agreement. "But you've been

**Who's afraid of
Witherspoon
Fisch?
I am
Not I
I suppose I
might be, if
given the chance
but who knows?**

The stranger ignored- or didn't notice- my expression, and fiddled with the lighter, doing basic sorts of tricks one learns to impress girls at parties. He sighed, and sighed again; it was getting on my nerves. Who did he think he was, coming into *my* bar and sighing like he owned the place?

Finally he ordered a complicated-sounding drink which, in light of the language barrier, turned into a dark beer and a shot of cheap whiskey. He dropped the latter, glass and all, into the beer and threw it back. As he set it down and motioned for another, he said, "Would you like to know what I found out today?"

Try as I did I couldn't bring myself to care any less, and I told him so. He looked me square in the ear canal and declared, "I found out today that I am mad."

He shrugged and a shiver slid up my spine at the absence of the sound that should have whispered up from the edges of his shabby trench coat. It was eerie; but then, so is everything else on a night like this. "Not hiding, really; hiding out. Biding my time, as it were. Nothing much to do now, anyway, except wait."

I wasn't sure what he meant, and I told him so.

**What is there to fear
but eccentricity**

madness

truth?

**I suppose none of
these, and all of
them for surely one
cannot exist without
the others.**

I made a sound, somewhere between a laugh and a snort, that tickled my sinuses and made me cough. “Did you, now?”

He nodded gravely. “You can imagine my surprise.”

I met his eyes over my drink and grinned. “And who told you that you were mad?”

He sighed, deep and mournful, examining his hands on the counter without really seeing them. “I suppose I’ve always suspected. It’s hard not to wonder, isn’t it, when you see the mistakes you’ve made and the messes you’ve gotten into. Gotten *other people* into. I never meant to hurt anyone, really,” he insisted, and looked at me sadly, “I thought I could do a good job. I thought I *had* done.”

His eyes fixed on me, and he smiled; sad, tired, defeated, and yet the expression, as it crossed his weathered features was thoroughly unnerving. My eyes left his and flew of their own accord to my cigarette, now just a cherryless butt. I flicked it away and he lit another with his strange sleight of hand and gave it to me before doing the same for himself. “Can’t you feel it?” he asked, gazing at the city, the street, the shops, seeing them as though for the first and last time.

**They are one and the
same, after all
when viewed through
eyes that know no
time.
So who’s afraid of
Witherspoon Fisch?
I am
Me, too
As are we all.
Without the fear he
would not be.
He sees it not but
knows it’s there.**

“Who have you hurt?” I asked, curiosity edging in on my hard-won apathy.

He motioned around the bar. “You, the bartender.... You didn’t lose your job because of the argument, you know. You lost it because there’s someone else in line, who will work harder and for less. You lost it because that’s how the world works these days, and it’s all my fault.”

Without taking my eyes from him I made a mental note of everything visible on and about my person. Sure, there is nothing unusual about someone newly unemployed finding comfort in a bottle, but had I said something? Had I done something to reveal that fact? The whiskey had finished warming my gut and begun to work on my brain, so I couldn’t be sure.

I tried in vain to hide the eagerness with which I drew the smoke into my nicotine-starved lungs; ‘feeling it’ could not have been lower down on the list of things I wanted to do just then, but I could, and he knew it.

“Something can still be done,” I said, mid-puff, and incited a vicious bout of coughing. He waited for me to recover, my eyes watering, before shaking his head.

“There was never anything to be done. You know that; or perhaps you don’t. Right from the start” he gestured again with his cigarette, “this was it.”

**It is the fear he
protects.**

**It shelters us,
and makes us be.**

**So who’s afraid of
Witherspoon Fisch?**

“Or the bartender here,” he continued, “it’s my fault he’s here. He doesn’t *want* to be, I assure you. He wants desperately to be home, with his wife and daughters. They live in Kharkov, you know, in eastern Ukraine. All five of them share a two room apartment on Karl Marx St. near the English school where the girls teach. He sends money to them every month so they don’t lose the apartment, even though he’s had to sleep in the bar for almost a year. His oldest is having a baby, but she’ll miscarry soon. That’s my fault too,” he hung his head, “all of it is.”

I could lie. I could say with dead eyes and a straight face that I was wholly, completely unfazed by his words. I glanced at the bartender, who continued absently to clean, gazing at a discolored snapshot taped rudely above the register. *Ah*. “Well that’s a sad story alright. Why did you do it?” I could tell another lie; I could claim I knew why I kept egging him on.

“But you- you’re-” I couldn’t say the word, couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“And who am I, then?” he asked with a smile. “God? The Devil? What title am I given these days, and in these parts?” The coarse laughter grated on my ears once more and I shivered. “I should do something, then? What would you have me do, and what’s more, why?” His voice had acquired a rueful, mocking tone. “At some point one must cut one’s losses.”

Oppressive silence threatened again. “So which are you, then?” I asked quietly.

“Which?” he giggled this time. “What difference? And what makes you so sure there is one?”

I shrugged and shook my head; I wasn’t sure, had no idea, and I felt like a child.

“I didn’t mean to,” he shook his head, “it just sort of... happened. Everything was going great, life growing and cultures flourishing and then...” he sighed again- *goddammit*- “then, it all went to hell.”

“Well,” I said against my better judgment, “maybe you should fix it.”

He clucked his tongue and shrugged. “It’s not so easy, though, because I’m mad. If I wasn’t, I suppose I could fix it, but...” Another shrug. Silence prevailed for a time and I told myself I would stop tormenting him. Really, I did. I swore I would leave him alone, or change the subject; anything to keep his mind off his psychosis. It takes some digging, but there is a moral center in me somewhere. “That’s why,” he continued suddenly, “the world is like it is. That’s why it’s crazy; because *I’m* crazy. Maybe that means I *could* fix it...” he lost himself in thought.

“But if the world is crazy, and you’re crazy, then you’re only crazy in comparison with an insane world, correct?” Sure, I have a moral center, but sometimes it gets a bit... *distracted*. I barreled on without awaiting a response. “So that means you’re perfectly sane!”

He tossed away the unfinished cigarette and smiled.

“Enjoy,” he said, and I was left alone in the sickly streetlight with my dimly smoldering, nearly extinguished ember.

I am not at all sure whether it was he or I who disappeared that night. But, as always and with everything, what’s the difference?

He shot me an odd look. "I don't think you quite understand. The world is mad because I created it, and *I am mad*. A rational mind cannot create that which is *truly* irrational, and vise versa. The only way you can judge the logic of a thing is to compare it to what you consider logical. All I had in the Beginning was my own mind, and that mind was- and still is- stark, raving mad."

"The only thing that's wrong with your mind is that you genuinely believe you crated the world!" I cried triumphantly, throwing back another drink. His eyes grew dark, but I was too drunk to care.

What difference?

“You don’t believe me, then?” his voice carried as much hurt as anger. I just laughed and shook my head. “How did I know you’d lost your job? How did I know about our friend here?” he gestured to the bartender, who mistook the motion as a drink request. The stranger tried to deny it but the bartender ignored him.

“I’ll tell you how you knew: cold reading. Ever hear of it? It’s what psychics do to fool the gullible. They generalize, infer, and make claims that cannot be refuted for one reason or another. Simple to do, really, because people are, as a rule, stupid.”

He chuckled then, and patted me on the back pointedly. “Yes, I suppose they are. But, hypothetically, what could I do to convince you?”

“You could end the world,” I suggested. “No big, fiery balls of doom or anything, just uncreate it.” He pointed out that, were he to end the world, I would also no longer be around to convince. “You could change some major part of history. Make it so that World War II didn’t happen or something. Or would I not realize anything had changed?” He shook his head.

My pack of cigarettes had long since disappeared, but suddenly a lit one appeared in his hand. “Hey, why’d you bum from me if you had your own?”

He shrugged. “It’s a good way to start a conversation.” I couldn’t remember hearing the soft fizz of the lighter, or the click of the lid as it shut, but I chalked that up to the alcohol. I asked him for one and he obliged, producing an already lit cigarette from... wherever. I couldn’t focus well enough to catch his sleight of hand, and it made me uneasy; there was an aura of self-assurance about him that hadn’t been there before. He suddenly looked purposeful, almost sinister, and I couldn’t explain it.

Out of nowhere I said, “Sober me up.” At no point had this thought crossed my conscious mind, but it left my mouth and

immediately I wished it hadn't. He smiled as I dropped my head to my arms.

I've been drunk more times than I can count. Slightly fewer times than I've played the 'am I good to drive' game, the answer to which should have probably always been 'no.' However, when I've been drinking and I begin to contemplate sobering up, my brain likes to play a game as well; it swears up and down that yes, I absolutely am. It convinces me, too, until I stand up or get pulled over, or wake up the next morning and realize I don't remember driving home. The feeling I had in the bar that night was absolutely, unequivocally, without question not the same thing at all. Because you see, I was an alcoholic back then. Still am, truth be told, but that is irrelevant. I've dried out and cleaned up several times over the years, sometimes for months at a stretch. *That* is what that night felt like. Not withdrawals, not the shakes; every cell in my body began a melancholy chorus of 'How Dry I Am' like they tend to do when I've been oh, so good for oh, so long and just one won't hurt, now will it? To celebrate the parched and barren but morally upstanding citizen I'd become. That night, as I sat next to the creator of the world, I felt the bored, apathetic tug of the ground beneath a wagon I hadn't been aware of boarding.

"You win," I muttered, and skulked off to the bathroom to splash water on my face. The stranger muttered something that sounded like 'what difference?' as the door closed behind me. As I stood in front of the cracked and dirty mirror it occurred to me how much money I'd spent, and how difficult it would be to remove myself from the bar without owing up to it. I stood there for some time, staring at myself and trying to think. No option presented itself, so I shrugged and walked back out into the smoky bar.

"Where did he go?"

The bartender stared at me uncomprehendingly and gestured toward the row of shots in front of my spot, and he

didn't stop me as I headed outside, forgetting my lighter and coat. I went to the next bar, and the next, and the next, looking for god. That sounds silly, but I did. Each time I had one drink, and each time I left without paying. No one stopped me.

Problem Solving

Something slimy hit the back of Felix Mitchell's head as he hurried off the rickety school bus. Probably a spit wad, and an impressive one at that; firm enough to hurt, but wet enough to splatter and soak through his shaggy black hair. He stubbornly resisted the urge to flinch until an apple, thrown at his neck, caught him off guard. He fell to his hands and knees and a flood of muddy water cascaded over his ill-fitting, hand-me-down clothes as the bus sped off through the puddle at the foot of his driveway. He could no longer hear the taunts and jeers but he could see them, pointing fingers and faces mashed up against rear windows.

Kindergarten was brutal. But it had ceased to matter, for the time being, because he was home and Mother would be there and they would sit by the big bay window, and he would hold the ball of yarn while she knitted. A sweater, a scarf, a blanket. Felix rose slowly and gazed at that window, cocking his head slightly. How odd it looked in that neighborhood, how out of place. He had never before noticed what an eyesore his home was; at least for those who didn't know the beauty it contained. Outside it was rundown- curtains ripped and tattered, porch steps cracked and broken, weeds creeping stealthily toward the front door, white picket fence leaning forlornly over the balding lawn. The porch swing no longer hung straight and the yellow paint on the house was chipped and dingy, but inside it was different. Inside, the clutter was comfortable, the shabby furniture well broken in, and fantastic stories and creatures were outlined by the cracks in the walls.

Felix leaped over the gaping hole where the third step should be and reached for the door knob. Locked. He made a face. "Not again," he moaned and tried a second time, but the lock held. He stood there, unsure, wondering if she had fallen asleep like last time; had taken too many of her pills without waiting for him to give her the right number. He'd camped outside, in the shed, that time. Two days.

He circled the house, half-heartedly looking for an open door, an unlatched window that didn't exist. He sat on the bottom step of the porch and began to draw in the dust with a stick.

He slowly sketched a picture of a little girl from his class. He thought he might like her, she was cute and he wanted to be friends. She didn't talk to anyone though, least of all him. She was weird, like him. Sometimes she would cry, for no reason, but instead of tears thick streams of red would flow down her cheeks and stain her clothes. The teacher would take her into the bathroom and clean her up without a word, and the children were instructed not to ask about it. One time, at recess, a group of boys cornered her on the playground and demanded that she make it happen. Felix was watching from the ground where they'd left him, bruised and bleeding himself, but utterly transfixed by the situation, wondering what would happen. They poked and prodded and demanded that she make it happen, and she did- but not before bringing the rock she held in a cupped hand around in a wide arc that ended squarely against one boy's head. He had howled and cried and bled, and Felix cheered silently from his place in the dust as the little gang raced off to tattle. Rose- that was her name- smiled at him and walked away.

The door behind him opened and he hurriedly erased the portrait and turned around. "Felix, what is your name are you doing out here?"

"The door was locked," he murmured and followed her inside. He noticed as the door thudded shut behind him that the sun had begun to set. He almost wished she hadn't woken up so he could sit outside and watch it for a while. Mother weaved her way upstairs again, muttering to herself, and Felix sighed dramatically. No knitting tonight. He went into the kitchen and made himself a peanut butter sandwich, took off his muddy clothes and curled up on the couch to sleep.

The next morning started with the usual bitter glass of orange juice, little grains of something refusing to dissolve at the bottom that he was ordered to eat with a spoon (he didn't today though; there was too much of it, and it tasted terrible, so he rinsed the cup out in the sink while his mother was busy yelling into the phone at his father). Even when she wasn't shouting Felix knew it was his father on the other end, just by the tone of her voice. He smiled as he ate his bagel- Father had been calling a lot lately. That usually meant he would be staying with them for a while, soon. He sang a little song as he pulled on the clothes that smelled the least dirty, a song he made up himself about seeing his dad again, and caught the bus to school.

His heart thumped excitedly as he boarded, noticing immediately that the boy who usually lead the taunting wasn't there. There was an empty seat in front of Rose and he sank into it, trying to watch her reflection in the window glass. His stomach fluttered- it would be a good day.

The other boys didn't pick on him as much, and he got a report card that Mother would be proud of, if she saw it. He had more energy than he could ever remember having, and all these things gave him the confidence to finally talk to Rose.

They were practicing their letters, drawing pictures and writing little stories with great big pencils. Felix waited until Rose went to sharpen her big pencil, and then he followed her to the back of the class. "Hi." She just looked at him, smiled a little, and continued turning the chunky metal crank on the sharpener. "I'm Felix," he said, and then regretted it. He wanted people to start calling him by his middle name, Elias. It sounded more grown up.

"I know," she said softly, not looking at him. He tried again.

"Want to play on the swings at recess?" he asked. She shook her head. The red tears had started to form. He looked at her and cocked his head, confidence slightly deflated, but not

enough to stop him when he knew he should. "Why do your eyes do that?"

She looked at him full on now, and a drop slid down her cheek and hit her jumper. She shrugged. She didn't look sad, and he repeated the question, suddenly more curious than he'd ever been. The need for an answer chewed at him and made him anxious, but he didn't know why.

"I don't know," she whispered, "they just do."

"But why don't you make it stop?"

"I can't."

"It's weird."

"I know."

They regarded one another in silence, and Felix realized suddenly that he could help her- he could give her the reason she didn't have. He smiled warmly and for a moment, so did she.

The shrieks rippled from the back of the class like a wave, up to the front, to the teacher, who leaped over her desk and grabbed Felix by the arm, tearing him away from Rose and out the door. He looked at his empty hand, muttered something about his pencil, hardly hearing the shouts of his classmates or the scrape of the chair as Rose sat down calmly and started drawing again, carefully moving the paper away from the puddle that was forming in front of her.

The principal regarded him from the other side of the desk. Felix just sat there, shifting uncomfortably under the gaze, wondering why he was in here and wishing he could go back to writing his story about the goat. The story sat on top of the desk, between a big file, full of papers, and a telephone. The phone rang, the principal spoke quickly, eyes never leaving the little boy whose hands were still sticky and moist.

"I called your mother, Felix, but no one answered. Do you know where she might be?"

With a start Felix realized he'd forgotten to lay out her pills before he left. He groaned, explained the situation to the principal. "She's probably asleep," he finished.

"And your father? We don't have a number for him. Or an aunt, maybe? Is there anyone we can call?" Felix shook his head. The man sighed. "Do you understand why you're here, Felix?" He shook his head again. Another sigh, a rough clearing of the throat, and the office door swung open to admit two men Felix had never seen before. "These men are going to take care of you, son, so go with them and do as they say." With an obedient nod the little boy followed them out.

They got into a car that had a grate like a police car. Felix sat quietly in the back, answering questions and assuring them that his mom would come for him soon, when she woke up. They nodded indulgently, and walked him into a bathroom where they cleaned him up, got him fresh white clothes, and then showed him to a room that he was told would be his. "But, my mom's coming soon. I won't need the bed," he told them. They nodded again and locked the door behind them.

Sometime later a nurse came in, and he tried to sound out her name, etched on a tag on her shirt: A-L-I-C-E. He wasn't sure how the 'c' was supposed to sound, so he asked. She left a coloring book and some crayons for him, patting him on the head and calling him honey. He liked her, he decided. He didn't like the doctor who came in after her, not at all, even though he seemed friendly enough. The doctor asked him strange questions about Rose, and Felix asked how he knew about her. The doctor gave him a strange look, asked some more questions, scribbled on the pad of paper in his lap and left. "When's my mom coming?" Felix called before the door was locked again.

The balding head poked in again and shook. "Probably soon, kiddo, probably soon. Why don't you color some more, hmm?"

Felix sighed and picked up a crayon shaped like a lion. He drew a picture of Rose, the way she looked before he had had to leave the room: jet black hair, green jumper, big, oozing tears on her face and a large, yellow pencil in one eye.

...& Finales

It was the darkest part of dawn when McKay began the journey home, shaken and on edge, the book tucked carefully under his coat. He nearly forgot to rub dirt on himself and on the shovel before crawling into bed beside his wife. She stirred gently, murmured something about the twins, and he shook his head sadly. "They didn' make it, dear. Ah'm sorry." She began to tremble, clinging to him fiercely, and they lay that way until morning.

"Got a favor ta ask ah' you, dearie." The dwarf clambered into the trailer, clumsily holding his bundle, refusing the help of the large bearded woman inside.

"An'thin' fer ye', love," she crooned, fixing her dressing gown over her very pregnant belly. "What's that ye've got there?"

He held it out to her, pulling back one corner of the blanket. She gasped and lifted it carefully from him. "Oh," she breathed, "such darlin' lil' things, ain't they? Where'd ye' find 'em?"

"Didn'. They was brought ta me by one'ah the men from town. Said he couldn' take care'ah 'em. An' look," he pulled the blanket back further, exposing the sutures that joined them. "Did it hisself, he says. So's we'd take 'em. Don' that jus' beat all?"

The bearded lady looked slightly horrified, but then just shook her head. "Desperate times," was all she said. She set them gently in the bassinette in the corner and began to bustle about the tiny space, gathering baby paraphernalia.

"S an interestin' idea though, ta be sure," the dwarf continued, "don'tcha think?"

"What is?" she asked absently.

"Creatin' freaks. Takin' reg'lar people an' makin' 'em inta freaks. We're kinda hurtin' e're since tha pinheads took sick, an' Kate up an' married that fella...."

The bearded lady stopped and eyed him fiercely. "Why, Trisvan, what in tha name'ah all that's holy are ye' on about? Ye' can go round *makin' freaks*. 'T jus' ain't *right*."

"Well, o'course they gotta be willin', folks who've no way ta earn a decent livin'...."

She cut him off. "T'ain't *right*. Ah mean, this life's all well

an' good, but we barely make enough ta feed ourselves, ne'er mind anyone else. An' besides, that's what geeks and gaffs is fer."

"But think about it, Vera. We could have any kinda freaks we c'n dream up, an' then some. We'd be the biggest show in tha country, an' then we could afford ta feed 'em. It'd be a lil' rough a' first, but then... jus' think. Givin' honest folk a chance ta earn a honest livin'. We'd be doin' a public service."

She hesitated, stood gently stroking her curly black goatee. "An' who'd we get ta do such a thing, hm? I don' s'pose your town doctor'd be willin' ta ride with us, makin' freaks fer a livin'?"

"Ah dunno," he admitted, "Ah'd needa talk ta 'im. 'S it really such a bad idea, though?"

Vera shrugged. "S'pose not. Makes sense, after a fashion, jus' don' sit quite right, if ye' know what I mean. Not e'reyone's cut out ta live like this. Ah like it fine, but...." She sighed. "An'way, it's late. Git ta bed, git some sleep. We'll talk it over wit tha others in the mornin'."

Trisvan nodded. "G'night, dearie. An' thanks fer yer help."

She waved him off. "Faces like that, a body *can* very well say no."

"Alice, ye' awake?" Trisvan tapped softly at the trailer door, trying to keep it from opening of its own accord. The effort failed, and he peered inside at the bundle of blankets on the cot. "Alice?"

"Mmm?"

"Ye' awake?"

She groaned. "Ah am now. What do ye' want a' this ungodly hour?"

The little man smiled. "S 2 in the aft'rnoon, Alice."

"Like ah said, ungodly hour." She stood slowly, stretching, making a halfhearted attempt to cover herself as she did so, and gestured him in. Even in his line of work her lack of propriety made him delightfully uncomfortable, and he tried to avert his eyes. She sighed loudly. "Fer godssake, Trisvan, 's nothin' ye ain't seen b'fore." With a childish grin she quickly parted and reclosed her covering, exposing for the briefest of moments her perfect breasts and belly; the

only places, save her hands, feet, and face that were not heavily tattooed. "What can Ah do fer ye', darlin'?" she lit a clove and reclined, legs crossed, facing him.

"Ah had an interestin' visitor last night," he began, and explained to her about the twins. Her eyes sparkled.

"What a marv'lous idea!" she cried, nearly singeing a curtain with the smoldering cherry, "an' ye' say ye'r doctor came up with't all on 'is own?"

Trisvan nodded. "Said 'e couldn' keep 'em, an' thought that's tha only way we would. Which's true, o'course, but still. Ah don' rightly know what ta make a'it."

"Are ye' kidding? This's as good an idea as any ye've had. If another show has a need fer certain freaks, we can make 'em, and make a pretty penny besides!" she lit a second clove with the first, and offered him one, which he accepted.

"Ye' don' think it's, Ah don' know, agains' nature, or som'thin?"

She made a face and glanced down at her colorful form. "Some 'ud say Ah violate nature, don'tcha think?"

"Well, sure, aft'r a fashion, but it's yer choice so it's diff'rent."

She made a sound, something between a snort and a laugh. "Ah ain't never told ye' about my first?" He shook his head. "My daddy gave me my first, jus' b'fore he sold me ta tha man Ah come ta ye' from. Said it's so's he could keep track a'me, claim what's his iffen he ever needed ta." She stood and swished the cloth away from her back, pointing to a design just above her tailbone that was much more faded and less skillfully done than the rest. "Tha mark'a tha whore," she said, and sat down again, "branded like cattle. So Ah fixed it tha only way Ah could: Ah got more tattoos, beautiful ones, that made me feel beautiful insteada cheap and fer sale."

Trisvan nodded. "An' how, exactly, 's that diff'rent from what we'd be doin' to these kids?"

Alice smoked in silence a while, then shook her head. "Ma'be 's no diff'rent a'tall, but that don' change tha fact that what my daddy done ta me made me who Ah am and Ah wouldn' change it." She

smiled. "An' b'sides, iffen this doctor's as skilled as ye' say, likely as not he could put 'em right when they get big, iffen they wanted." The covering had slipped down around her waist, and Trisvan barely heard her words. Her line was perfect, her curves soft and delicate, and despite the opinions of more conservative folk her tattoos accentuated them in ways that clothing never could. He shook his head to clear it and met her gaze.

"Ah s'pose tha's why Ah came to ye', after all," he said, "ta get some sort of permission."

Her head flew back and she laughed. "Permission? Honey, 's ye'r carnival! Ye' can do whate're yer lil' heart desires! Now shoo," she flicked her hand at him, "Ah've got people ta see an' things ta do b'fore the show tonight."

He rose to go, stubbing out the half-smoked clove as he went. "Trisvan?"

"Hm?"

She hesitated. "Have ye' told anyone but me an' Vera about this?" He shook his head. "Ma'be ye'd better hadn't," she said finally, pursing her lips, "keep it b'tween the three'a us, where they come from, an' let 'em grow up thinkin' it ain't never been another way."

He considered this as he hobbled down the steps, nodding to himself, and headed for the bar.

Mrs. McKay successfully stifled a shriek when she looked down to see the twisted little figure at her door. She was less adept, however, at concealing her disgust when from thin, frog-like lips came a mention of 'services' he was told could be found at this address. She gaped at him, wordless. "Ye'r husb'nd, ma'am, 's he in?" Angry tears became relief as she nodded and lead him to the kitchen.

"Someone ta see ye', dear," she said, and turned to leave. She had nearly escaped the strange visitor before she felt a gnarled hand in hers and heard a voice rise up from around her hips.

"Pard'n me, ma'am, but shouldn' ye' be in bed? I heard tell ye' had a bit'a a rough night."

"*Ah'm fine*," she snapped, pulling her hand away. "Now, if ye'll *excuse me*," and out she stormed, leaving the stranger's apologetic

expression behind her.

"Ye' look a bit tha worse fer wear," said the dwarf, clambering up into the seat opposite the doctor.

"Ye' don' look s'good yerself, friend."

The little man nodded. "Ah reckon tha's true. But Ah needed ta speak with ye' about yer, ah, *proposal*."

The doctor glared at him, the heavy circles beneath his eyes giving them a menacing quality.

Trisvan bristled. "What Ah mean is, we'd like ta enlist yer services. Ye'r used ta trav'ling, an' we could use a doctor on board, no doubt about that. 'Specially one with yer, er, talents."

Mckay cocked an eyebrow. "My talents? An' jus' what could those talents be, might Ah ask?"

The table hit him at chest height, but Trisvan folded his hands and leaned forward as far as he was able. "We'd like more'a what ye' gave us, ye' see. Cust'm freaks."

The doctor's hand came crashing violently down onto the table. "*Keep yer voice down*," he snarled.

Unfazed, Trisvan repeated his request in a whisper. "We feel there's somethin' ta this," he continued, "an' we'd like ta take ye' with us when we leave. We'll pay as much as we can, enough to live on least've all, an' a bit more besides. Ta send home," he gestured toward the noises coming from the bathroom.

"Ye'r sick."

The dwarf looked puzzled. "T'was yer idea, after all. Ah just happ'n ta think it's a good'un."

They sat in silence as Mckay poured himself a drink, gulped it down, poured again. Eventually the little man stood, sliding a wrinkled business card across the table as he did. "If ye' change yer mind," he said softly, and saw himself out.

He wasn't at all surprised when there was an extra set of hands helping tear down the tents two evenings later.

The girls sat on the steps of the trailer they had shared with Vera since their arrival, tracing patterns in the dirt with their fingers and giggling to each other.

"An' jus' what do ye' two think ye're doin', then?" Vera regarded them, hands on her wide hips. "Shouldn' ye' be doin' yer lessons?"

The girls looked up guiltily. "We are," said Sophia, ever the spokesman. "We're learnin' the Greek myths."

"Looks ta me like ye're playin' in the dirt."

Rose shook her head emphatically, noticed the dust caked on her fingers and wiped them hurriedly on their dress. "No, see?" Sophia pointed first to the swirling design in front of her, "Narcissus an' Echo," then to the one in front of her sister, "Daedalus an' Icarus."

"Mm-hm. Inside, both of ye'. Ye've got a show t'night, don' ferget, an' then we've all gotta help tear down. *Go!*" She shoed them off the steps and into the cramped little trailer.

"Aw, Vera, why can' Rose do tha show by herself? She don' even gotta talk," Sophia grinned, thinking herself clever, and Rose giggled. Vera rolled her eyes and walked away, wiping out the drawings with her shoe as she did so. They made her uncomfortable, those abstract little designs, in the same way the girls themselves did. In those innocent little heads lived secrets she could only see in profile, hinted at only when they thought they were alone. Generally, Vera chalked it up to that connection that only twins share, that impenetrable wall of *knowing*, but it was more than that. Deeper. It frightened her in ways she couldn't express and so she brushed it off as best she could and went about her day.

Sophia sighed heavily as Rose pulled out the tattered textbook they shared and began to read. Sophia couldn't concentrate, however, and let her mind wander.

I wonder what it would be like to be separated, she thought.

Terrible, Rose retorted between snippets of ancient verse.

Why terrible?

I'd have to do my own talking.

Sophia rolled her eyes. *No, really. I'll bet Doc could separate us, if we asked nicely.* She ran her fingers along the place where their torsos were joined, and Rose started wriggling uncomfortably. *Don't,* she thought, *that tickles. Besides, don't you think he'd have done it*

already, if he could?

No, cause we're an attraction.

Hmm.

Don't you want to have your own body? Even a little bit?

Rose looked at her twin and shook her head slowly. *I don't know what I'd do (if you left me).*

I'm not going anywhere, dummy. Sophia replied, reading the subtext in her sister's reply. *Wanna draw some more? These stories make more sense when we draw them.* Rose agreed and they pulled out a notebook, even more worn than the textbook, and began copying the myths into the intricate patterns that no one else seemed to understand, filling in sensory details the original authors saw fit to ignore.

Three short raps and the rickety door eased open. "Care fer a drink?"

Mckay nodded. After several years he'd finally learned how to keep pace with his tiny employer, occasionally falling into a limp he didn't have merely because the dwarf had one. He would catch himself quickly, and always hoped it was quick enough to avoid notice. "Gotta give these lil' towns credit," Mckay said as they took a spot at the bar, "a' least tha drinks're cheap." Trisvan nodded and ordered two whiskeys, top shelf, keeping his head slightly down to avoid the ever-present stares. "Feeling flush tonight?" Even fatigue couldn't hide his surprise.

A quick shrug, and then, "Yer girls're bringin' in good business." They sat quietly for a time, until Trisvan asked, in barely a whisper, "Any new ideas?"

Mckay sighed and shook his head. "Ideas Ah got. What Ah need're volunteers. 'S not too easy ta convince people ta let me cut 'em up."

"Times's hard. Surely there's lotsa people who could use tha opp'rtunity, we jus' gotta find 'em. We're doin' God's work," he chuckled and patted Mckay on the back.

"Ah don' know 'bout all that," he smiled, took a sip. "She found a new man, ya know."

“Yer wife?”

“Mmm.”

“Sorry ta hear that. One’ah her- ah-?”

“Mmm.”

Trisvan nodded knowingly. “She ask fer a divorce?”

Mckay shook his head. “She wants tha money ta keep comin’. Guess it’us his idea she tell me atall, an’ even then it took well nigh a year.”

“What’s he do?”

“Business owner, ‘r some such. She tol’ me, but fuck if Ah care anymore.”

“They’re more trouble than they’re worth, ain’t they?”

Mckay chuckled. “No’ at first, they ain’t. They lure ye’ in, make ye’ feel like tha biggest man on tha block... Then wait ‘til ye’re in as deep as it goes an’ they’re off with someone else.”

“Ye’ knew it were comin’.”

“Yeah, Ah knew. Jus’ didn’ b’lieve it, Ah s’pose. Fig’red one day Ah’d be back home, an’ things’d be better, like they was b’fore. An’ Ah could jus’ forget all this,” he gestured absently.

Trisvan’s laugh was mildly unsettling, even to those who knew him well. It was throaty and deep, and tinged with something cancerous. “Ye’ ne’er forget the circus,” he said.

A sudden commotion sent the bar into a momentary chaos. The doors flew open, and in stumbled a raggedy man, slurring wildly and trailing his stench like a banner behind him. Some of the patrons humored him as he made his rounds, telling jokes and stealing nips of their drinks. The rest ignored him until he wore himself out, slouching in silence behind a beer he bought from change that appeared out of his shoe. He got up once to rummage through the ashtrays for cigarette butts, and began painstakingly unwrapping and rerolling them into something smokeable.

Hopping off the stool, Trisvan nudged Mckay and gestured toward the man. He slapped some money on the table and hobbled out the door. The doctor remained at the bar, steeling himself by shooting the rest of the whiskey that was too good to shoot, and ordered two more. When they arrived, he joined the man at his table and offered

him the whiskey and a cigarette.

"Ah ain't got nothin' worth stealin'," said the man, patting his jacket where the pockets should have been.

Mckay shook his head. "What's yer name, friend?"

The man gave an exaggerated shrug and grinned. "Don' recall. Been too long since Ah used it. "Ey, yew' works jus' fine."

"An' what is't ye' do?" asked the doctor after an uncertain pause. Rather than respond, the man yanked his boot off and shook it at McKay. Several coins rattled around inside, as he tried not to retch. "E'er try carny work?"

"Son, Ah've done all mann'r a' work in my day. A jack've-all-trades, ye' might say."

"Well then, Jack, Ah may jus' have a proposition fer ye', if ye're of a mind," McKay lowerd his voice to discourage the eavesdropping that was hard to avoid in such a small room. The man nodded slowly, though it was difficult to tell if any of it sunk in.

Another drink, another smoke, a quick stumble back to camp and the man was made comfortable, given a sponge bath and prepared for surgery. It was with great relief that McKay finally put the drunkard under sedation; there was something in the eyes that unsettled him, something that was clearly not allowing itself to be drowned in drink alone.

"Ah'll need a' least two weeks b'fore he's ready to move," McKay said, wiping his hands and admiring his work. Trisvan looked nonplussed.

"Two weeks?" he shook his head. "Ah don' know if we can do that. Ye' know as well as Ah do that they stop comin' after tha first few nights. Only so many times a body can see the same things, an' we gots ta keep movin'."

"Two weeks ain't nearly what Ah'd like. This's the biggest one Ah've done yet. B'sides, once he's ready ta sho you know we'll make up the losses, sure 'nough."

"That we will, Ah've no doubt. But we've gotta eat 'tween now an' then."

"Ah've some money. Ah'll run inta town an' get supplies. Ah'll be needin' a drink anyhow, and truth be told Ah don' much want ta be

‘round when he comes to.”

Trisvan chuckled. “Can’ rightly say Ah blame ye’, but shouldn’t someone be here ta explain things ta him? Ah don’ s’pose ye’ told him what ye’d be doin’.”

“Matter a’fact, Ah did. Said he didn’ care, so long as he ‘still had eyes fer seein’, a mouth fer drinkin’, an’ a cock fer fuckin’.”

Pulling back the sheet, Trisvan grinned. “Well he’s certainly got that.”

“B’sides, Ah thought Ah’d let the girls explain it ta him, help him come ta terms.”

“Ye’ might be right, a’ that. Sure ye’ wanna leave ‘em alone with him? We don’ know a thing about him, save that this town’ll shortly be missin’ its drunk.”

“They’re smart girls, an’ anyway Ah’m sure Alice’d like ta intr’duce herself, too.”

The dwarf nodded and went to fetch them, while the doctor set about soaking his scrubs and washing his tired face. Before he left, he watched his sleeping patient. It was beautiful work, undoubtedly his best yet. He patted the softly heaving flank on his way out, pausing momentarily as the beast stirred but didn’t wake.

The shriek rattled the haphazardly constructed camp to its foundations, and carried far enough for McKay to take note as he nursed his drink. Smiling in spite of himself, he lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply and felt himself relax.

The only sounds emanating from the medical tent were gentle sobs and a female voice murmuring softly. Alice had left some time ago, content to leave the new arrival in the care of the twins, and they did their job faithfully, stroking his newly trimmed hair and telling him grand stories of his adoptive ancestors. They tended his stitches, washing them and applying ointment, swatting at his hands when they absently tried to scratch or pick, and even massaged and flexed his new legs to help the circulation and keep the muscles from atrophying while he healed.

As the days passed the sobs grew less frequent, and were eventually replaced by the clopping of hooves and swish of a tail. Sophia’s voice was still there, more often in the morning before drink

consumed their new playmate as he told them stories of his time abroad. He shocked everyone but the girls with his vast knowledge of foreign languages and the people who spoke them, and from his stories seemed to have lived a hundred different lives. He taught the girls Russian, and Arabic, and encouraged their use of the swirling patterns to tell their own made-up stories. In return, they reminded him that his name was Anton.

The circus moved on, and as he grew stronger and accustomed to his new mode of locomotion it was not uncommon to see the girls riding sidesaddle on his back, touring the grounds and helping him with his chores. The three became the unofficial welcoming committee for the new arrivals, helping them adjust to the changes to which they had- sometimes unwillingly- submitted. The angels with their semi-functional wings of snow or jet; the devils, with their coral implants and strangely swishing serpents' tails; the mermaids and lizard people and satyrs. Some had more difficulty adapting than others, but as the circus traversed the countryside they saw the hardships they'd been spared and grew to value their roles as performers. Rose and Sophia made a project of the children, those unfortunate souls whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for them, and since they often had no recollection of life before their wings or hooves or tails, the transition was nearly non-existent. It was a proud day indeed for McKay when he noticed the appendages growing with the hosts, having so beautifully melded with the original anatomy so as to be indistinguishable from it, except for the occasional tinge of green or yellow. The circus flourished, and adopted several natural freaks as well who, contrary to Trisvan's expectations, accepted their unnatural comrades as though they were family.

They didn't arrive in the town so much as find themselves there, thrown rudely in among the crumbling sidewalks and neglected buildings. There were no street signs, no displays of name or population, nothing at all to indicate that people lived there except for the overwhelming sensation of being watched. The caravan trembled to a halt, and for a while no one moved.

"Where're we?" Vera asked, peering over Trisvan's shoulder, out into the desolate space passing as a town square. "Ah didn' ev'n know there's a town here."

The little man shrugged. "Me neith'r," he said, "an' Ah can' rightly tell if an'one lives here."

"I's kinda creepy."

"Tha' i'tis." They watched in silence as nothing out the window moved or changed. A knock at the trailer door made them jump. McKay said nothing until the door was closed solidly behind him.

"Where d'yeh reckon we are?" he asked.

"We was jus' wonderin' tha same," Trisvan replied, still waiting for signs of life outside. "Ain' on'a map an'where. But i's gettin' late, an' we ain' gonna make it ta tha next town t'night. Might as well bunk down here an' wait fer mornin'."

"T'ain't tha worst idea Ah've heard. Ah'll let e'eryone know." The doctor disappeared again.

Vera sighed. "Ah don' know wha' else we'd do, but Ah'll tell yeh Ah don' much like th'idea 'a stayin' here all night."

"Ah know wha'cha mean, m'dear, but there's nothin' else fer it. Ah'll send Anton ta scout fer a -ah- *less exposed* spot," and he clambered down out of the trailer with a grunt.

Darkness seeped in as the little company crowded the vehicles around a disheveled church and set about preparing dinner. Out of habit they erected the mess tent and tables as the soup pot simmered. They ate like prisoners, hunched around their bowls and glancing over shoulders between mouthfuls. Presently, a bottle of something strong appeared and made the rounds, and as the lamps were lit the conversation became a little less strained, the glances less furtive. One of McKay's newest creations produced a guitar and Alice's rumbling alto moved several people to dance.

No one noticed as the eyes that had watched them all evening grew faces and began to emerge from the shadows.

"You can't stay here."

Trisvan heard the voice but not the words themselves and whirled around with a grin. "Well hey there, frien! We's startin' ta

think no'un lived here! Join us!"

The man cleared his throat and tried again. "You can't stay here. You have to leave."

Some of the earlier unease crept back into Trisvan's face. "We sure don' wan' ta impose, mind yeh, but yeh see we got a mite los'. Though' we'd camp here fer tha nigh' an' move on in tha mornin'." The man simply stared, dead eyed and motionless. The dwarf chuckled uncomfortably. "We'd be happy ta move tha trailers, if that'd put yer min' at ease."

The music stopped as notice of the stranger swept through the group. "A show, p'rhaps?" purred Alice, a bit more tipsy than even she realized. "Wha'd'ya say, guys? A show fer this lov'ly man an' his friends!" she gestured toward the townspeople who started at her words and slithered back into doorways and alleys.

The man shook his head. "*You can't stay here,*" he repeated, a hint of desperation in his voice, "*please.*" A second man appeared, tugging at the sleeve of the first like a child. He whispered something and pointed toward the trailers. The speaker pursed his lips and sighed. Without another word he nodded sadly and followed his companion into the church.

A moment of silent confusion became a frenzy of activity as the company prepared for the impromptu show, smothering the palpable unease with shouts and drink. Generators thrummed into life and bathed the town in yellow light as the musicians took up their instruments and the barkers cleared their throats.

"C'mon, girls, we're doin' a show!" Vera tried to sound cheerful as she bustled around their trailer choosing costumes and collecting accessories. Rose and Sophia hadn't moved since their arrival in the town, and they continued in this vein. "What?" She demanded, anxiety making her voice too sharp, too loud.

"We, uh, we don' feel well," Sophia murmured and glanced at Rose who shook her head.

Vera sat down and gathered them onto her lap. "Look, Ah know this place is a lil' strange," she said gently, "bu' this's wha' we do. They're jus' people like us, ain' they? Ain' nothin' ta be scared of." She smiled, almost believing it.

Sophia shook her head. "We've been here b'fore," she said slowly, uncertainly. "We should leave." She looked at Rose, "or somethin' bad'll happ'n."

Vera chuckled. "Oh, girls, nothin' bad'll happ'n. We'll do a show, we'll get some sleep, we'll leave in tha mornin'. Simple as pie. C'mon now, ge' dress'd, an' don' make me tell yeh again!" She stood, gave them each a peck on the cheek, and left them alone.

Do you know what the bad thing is? Sophia thought at Rose, who shook her head.

I don't remember. They hugged each other tightly and struggled into their dress.

It took some time before they were not performing to empty tents and calling out to absent ears, but gradually a crowd trickled into the circus light, blinking and cowering into one another like frightened, feral animals. They watched silently, no cheers, no applause, just great moist eyes gazing without comprehension. Trisvan stood at the gate collecting rusty coins and strange bobbles, anything the townspeople had to trade for admittance. Many seemed not to understand the concept of money at all and simply walked in, while others handed over moldering bills that had clearly been out of circulation for decades. One woman handed him a rock she found by the gate, and an ancient, creaky old man gave him a child's shoe. "Welcome, thank yeh, an' enjoy tha show!" Trisvan chirped at each newcomer, adding their donations to his growing pile of miscellany.

The creaky old man wound his way through the tents, stopping here and there to watch briefly before moving on again. The other patrons gave him a wide berth. He acknowledged no one as he shuffled around, peering into trailer windows and around dark corners, searching.

A woman's laughter floated out over the silent crowd and he followed it inside. Alice pranced across the stage, trying to engage the audience with silken scarves and suggestive straps, flirting, smiling, ignoring the men who recoiled at her touch. A stocking, expertly removed, floated down as those nearby moved away, narrowly avoiding the discarded garment and allowing it to crumple in the dust. Tassels and strip of cloth were all that remained when she

noticed the old man smiling softly in the corner, the only flicker of enjoyment in the room. Their eyes met and he smiled wider, warmly, gave a little wave. *Hello.* The knot in her stomach sprouted wings and lodged itself in her throat, stifling her scream and catching her breath as she darted off stage, scooping up her costume and clutching it desperately. He gave a little shrug and walked back outside, leaving the crowd to stare uncomprehendingly at the now empty stage.

As he lurked in the shadows trying to remember what it was he needed to find, he watched McKay hopped down from his trailer and head for the front gate. He glanced briefly at the old man as he passed, once, twice, a flicker of recognition dismissed with the shake of his head. Taking no particular care to be discreet, the old man scurried into the trailer, rummaged around, and reemerged minutes later with his coat pocket bulging triumphantly. He patted it and continued on, further back into the maze of trailers behind the circus. He knew where he was going now. He sat on the trailer steps and took out the book, thumbing gently through it while he waited.

It's almost time, Sophia thought.

We can't go.

We have to.

Or what, we'll get in trouble? Rose gave her sister an exasperated, fearful look. Sophia frowned. *They might actually listen to us if we could come up with a reason.*

I know.

Well?

I DON'T REMEMBER, OK? Rose nearly shouted, vocal chords quivering, waiting for the rush of air that didn't come. She wanted to scream, out loud, so someone other than her sister could hear but she had forgotten how, maybe never knew at all. Her half of their tiny body shook and Sophia put an arm around her.

We'll be fine. Just calm down, everything will be—
Shh.

What?

Don't you feel it?

Sophia shook her head, paused, nodded slowly. *What is it?* They crept to the door and peered out the window, around through

the shadows, down at the steps, at thin white hair on a mottled old scalp. In the next breath they were halfway out the back window, scrambling down as quietly and gracefully as their condition and costume would allow.

"Hey, wait!" They plopped to the ground as the old man came around the corner, sliding the book into his pocket as he did so. He smiled and knelt down, old joints creaking and popping. "I missed you."

Relief and understanding swept through Sophia and she smiled too. "Oh, it's *you*," she said with a sigh. Rose rubbed one eye uncertainly.

"You remember me!" The old man laughed joyfully. "It's been so long!" He hugged them both.

"Yeh look diff'rent," Sophia informed him.

"And there's two of you," he shot back. She nodded. "Why?"

The girls looked at each other and shrugged. "Happ'ns sometimes, Ah guess," she said.

"Hm."

"Yeh came fer tha book, didn' yeh?" He nodded. "An' yeh found it."

"Yup."

"Where was it?" He gestured vaguely toward McKay's trailer. "Huh. C'n we see?" He pulled it from his pocket and held it out, shifting uncomfortably in his crouched position. The girls took it, fingering the strange leather cover and gingerly turning the brittle pages. *How did we forget?*

I think we were supposed to, Rose replied, *or we would have left.*

The weight of the situation became tangible and Sophia stared at the old man. "We have ta go. *Now.*"

He nodded and stood, removing his coat and wrapping it around the girls. "We'll go there," he said, pointing up above the town at a tiny house perched precariously on a narrow outcropping of rock. "I knew you'd come back," he whispered happily as they hurried along through the shadows.

"Where're yeh off ta?" Anton chuckled behind them, four legs

propelling him faster than the girls'. "C'mon, yeh've gotta show ta do!" He scooped them up good-naturedly and plopped them on his broad back.

"No, Anton, we can't. Not here. 'S no' safe. He's a friend," Sophia pleaded, struggling to get down.

"Nope, c'mon, yeh c'n play with yer frien' later," and off he trotted toward their stage, the old man hobbling along behind.

They pleaded and begged as the curtain rose, revealing the girls riding sidesaddle as Anton paraded them across the stage. Wet, glassy eyes widened as the audience realized what they were seeing, murmurs of surprise and delight sweeping through the tent and out into the night.

"She's back"

"She came back to us!"

"It's time again, at last!"

Anton set the girls down to do their number as familiar music crackled from the speakers. They stood and stared in horror as the crowd surged forward, gnarled, arthritic hands reaching, grasping, eager and in awe.

Don't let her leave!

Rose and Sophia leaped off the stage and out into the darkness. The tent behind them surged and rumbled as the townspeople began to panic, amassing behind them as they ran.

Where are we going? Rose gasped, *how do we get up to the house?*

"I don't know," Sophia replied desperately, searching for the old man, knowing he couldn't keep up even if they found him. *He's old now*, she thought, *as old as we'd be if...*

Men in hooded cloaks emerged from the church around which the trailers still nestled. Agitated, they gestured wildly to each other until they noticed the girls and joined the chase. Up, up they raced, blindly, wildly, *just get away, stay away long enough for someone to make this stop....*

They heard Anton's shouts behind them, behind the mob, trying to overtake it. Thuds and cries floated up through the din as he knocked people aside, into one another, into the ground. Other familiar voices pierced the night as well, desperate, frightened voices,

but the words didn't carry, it didn't matter, they'd run out of road.

Below them surged an angry ocean, waves reaching for them as earnestly as the hands behind them. They spun around.

The townspeople had formed a circle around them. With practiced precision they fell into place, watching their savior with frantic, adoring relief. Silence fell, thick as fog, as the cloaked figures trudged up through the crowd.

The man who had spoken to Trisvan led the way, and when he reached the girls he removed his hood. "I told you to leave," he said sadly, "I'm sorry."

Rose smiled. "S ok," she whispered, "thanks fer tryin'."

Sophia glanced at her, surprised. Then she turned to the man. "We don' have tha book, an' neither d' yeh."

Spiros looked dismayed. "What do you mean, you don't have it? It has to be here, it's time for the ceremony."

"Well i'tisn't," she said haughtily, albeit less convincingly than she would have liked. "Maybe i's no' time, after all."

The townspeople tittered anxiously, and as they turned to mutter to each other they noticed the creaky old man moving slowly through them. The crowd opened for him, creating a path, and as he approached he held the book out to the girls. "It's up to you," he said, using his shoulders to block Spiros from the book.

"What happ'ns now?" Sophia asked, although she knew the answer.

"You save us, like you always do. You know that," Spiros said gently.

"An' if we don'?"

The hooded figures looked around anxiously. One pulled a knife from his sleeve and took a step toward them, as a flurry of circus voices rose from the back and were promptly silenced.

"Felix," Rose whispered to the old man, "why do I always get hurt when you're around?" A confused echo of 'Felix?' rippled down the hill.

He shrugged. "I'll write it better next time," he said, gesturing toward the book. "And here they call me Witherspoon."

"Why?"

He shrugged again. “Witherspoon Fisch.”

The girls gave the town a withering look. “That’s a really stupid name,” Sophia declared as the two climbed up onto the rock that separated them from the waiting water below.

There was relief on the twisted, inbred faces that pressed a little closer as Spiros and the man with the knife stepped forward. *We’ll save them, Rose thought, just like we always do. And then we’ll come back, just like always. It only hurts for a minute. It’s the right thing to do, it’s why we exist.* She smiled at her sister, warm, resigned and happy and willing to do what was necessary. Sophia nodded and they turned to face their people.

Rose- Sophia- stood atop the boulder, wind whipping
silvery hair around thin shoulders, the masses
gathered before them.

Waiting, as they always did, for her to fall; for her to
save them.

And then, she changed her mind.

Epilogue

*Sitting at his desk, the last man on earth
heard a knock at the door.*

*“I suppose,” said Witherspoon Fisch to no one
in particular, “I have a few more words left to
write.” With that, he opened the notebook that lay
before him, empty once more; and, ignoring the
knock, took up his pen to compose that which is
called World.*

